

# Cooperation between Adversaries: The US and Russia's Joint Effort against the Islamic State in Syria

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## **Abstract**

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The Syrian civil war has generated international media attention and interest since it broke out in 2011 as an Arab Spring uprising. The local conflict quickly became internationalized with two major coalitions at odds with each other—one supported by the United States and the other by Russia. The Russian coalition has included and backed the Assad regime in Syria, while the American coalition has supported several opposition groups and conducted air strikes against the Syrian government. However, the United States and Russia have managed to work together against a common enemy—the Islamic State. Cooperation is difficult to achieve, even between allies; oftentimes individuals defect in favor of their self-interests instead. Then how have the US and Russia managed to overcome their differences and incentives to defect and cooperate (avoiding war with each other) against the Islamic State? The answer rests in a thorough understanding of game theory and the Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma in which the two coalitions find themselves trapped.

The first chapter of this thesis introduces a few major concepts of game theory that are necessary to understand the analysis of American-Russian relations in Syria. This chapter provides foundational theory and methodology from Mancur Olson and Robert Axelrod, including an explanation of the Prisoner's Dilemma and why the model fits the Syria case study. It also provides context about the war in Syria and the US-Russia relationship in the conflict.

The second chapter discusses the two coalitions, their beliefs about punishment, and credible deterrence. In this chapter, the strategic concepts of deterrence and reciprocity are established and applied to the case study. In chapter three, the Prisoner's Dilemma model is applied to US-Russia relations over time, tracking the game between the two great powers. Specifically, major examples of American and Russian cooperation and defections are extracted from media sources and subsequently analyzed.

Finally, there is explanation of why punishment strategies and deterrence are the reasons for American-Russian cooperation and predictions about what cooperation between Washington and Moscow will look like in the war moving forward.

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“In situations where each individual has incentive to be selfish, how can cooperation ever develop?”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, pg. 1. The answer to US-Russian cooperation in Syria is developed from the application of Axelrod’s theory to real-world instances of defection and cooperation between the American coalition and Russian coalition in Syria, as reported on by major, internationally recognized media sources like *BBC*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *CNN*, and *Reuters*, as well as the US Government and the United Nations.

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## I. The Puzzle: US-Russian Cooperation in Syria

### Introduction

It likely seems intuitive to believe that actors with common interests and goals are inclined to cooperate and work together effectively to achieve these shared goals. If everyone wants the same thing, it is reasonable to assume everyone will work together to accomplish it. According to Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, "Groups of individuals with common interests are expected to act on behalf of their common interests, much as single individuals are expected to act on behalf of their personal interests."<sup>2</sup> However, this expectation is often unrealistic. Cooperation among group members is not easy to achieve, even among parties who want similar things. Oftentimes, individual interests trump group interests, and actors become inclined to defect against the group in order to gain more individually. Even in cases of common interests, there is always a way for individual actors to be more successful, and this usually involves defection instead of cooperation. In many cases, "what is best for each person individually leads to mutual defection, whereas everyone would have been better off with mutual cooperation."<sup>3</sup>

Think about group projects for example. Even if every individual wants an "A" on an assignment, different group members will understand success and the best way to achieve success differently, and they will also contribute to the final product at varying rates. Group work frequently results in cooperation failure—sometimes at the expense of gaining the shared objective. Thus, even allies and coalition partners are incentivized not to cooperate with one

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<sup>2</sup> Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, 1965

<sup>3</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 1984, pg. 9

another. And since it is difficult for actors on even the best of terms to cooperate, why would enemies or adversaries ever cooperate?

This is the puzzle in Syria. Washington and Moscow have managed to cooperate against the Islamic State despite reasonable expectations of constant defections. There are two major points that make US-Russian cooperation counterintuitive: (1) the two states have opposing interests in the Syrian civil war and its outcome, and (2) there is significant historical animosity between the two countries. Focusing on the war in Syria, the US and Russia have implemented policies that directly oppose one another and are supporting adversarial actors in the conflict. Since 2011, Russia has fervently supported Assad and his regime against the opposition, joining the war in 2015 to provide further military resources and political leverage to the Syrian government against the rebels. Russia's goal has been to keep Assad in power and maintain its single military base outside of the former Soviet Union and influence in the Middle East. In order to do this, Russia has conducted air strikes in Syria, provided military resources to the government forces, and vetoed eight United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions against Syria since the outbreak of the war.<sup>4</sup>

The United States, on the other hand, has opposed the Assad regime since the outbreak of the war and supported specific Syrian rebels against the government, including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Kurds. For example, from 2013-2017, the CIA ran a covert program called "Timber Sycamore," training and arming insurgents against the Islamic State and the Syrian regime.<sup>5</sup> Both the US and Russia's foreign policies also include limiting the other side's influence in and access to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

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<sup>4</sup> Euan McKirdy, "8 times Russia blocked a UN Security Council resolution on Syria," *CNN*, 21 July 2017

<sup>5</sup> Faysal Itani, "The End of American Support for Syrian Rebels Was Inevitable," *The Atlantic*, 21 July 2017



In addition to the recent American-Russian tensions regarding the war in Syria, the two states have historically harbored animosity for the other. Malevolence between Washington and Moscow climaxed after World War II during the Cold War, and relations between the two countries have been tumultuous ever since, especially as Russia attempts to regain parity with America (in Syria specifically and on a global scale). The United States and Russia are certainly estranged allies and frequently considered enemies. The two nations have starkly different visions for an ideal international system, and each prioritizes differing ideals and principles. The generally accepted stereotype is that Washington and Moscow do not like one another and rarely share common interests. So how have they managed to cooperate in Syria?

Well, “the foundation of cooperation is not really trust, but the durability of the relationship.”<sup>6</sup> The essence of, and motivation behind, cooperation is not actually necessitated by affinity for other actors or the desire to accomplish common goals. Cooperation develops when players recognize that it is a better option than alternatives in the long-term (and sometimes short-term); therefore, even opponents can achieve mutual cooperation if certain preconditions exist. An appropriate model for two-player cooperation and defection is the classic Prisoner’s Dilemma (PD). In the case of Syria, the US and Russia are trapped in an iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma (IPD), meaning the relationship is continuing indefinitely and the two must decide for each iteration of the game whether to defect or cooperate. They both have incentives to defect, and in a single PD situation, the best strategy for both sides is mutual defection. However, the social optimum, which is better than the outcome of mutual defection, can be reached with mutual cooperation. In this particular case, Washington and Moscow are incentivized to defect mutually in order to achieve their opposing goals in Syria; however, the social optimum is the

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 1984, pg. 182

defeat of the Islamic State. It is important to understand that cooperation between the US and Russia is not synonymous with collaboration. The US and Russia's cooperation in Syria is highlighted by the ability of the two great powers to avoid an escalation of mutual defections and go to war. Thus, cooperative moves are defined as actions that prevent the US and Russian coalitions from going to war with each other. Mutual defections are situations that, if continued or escalated, could eventually lead to war.

Therefore, cooperation in Syria is avoiding a great-power war. Since the United States and Russia have managed to avoid war with each other, they have clearly managed to obtain a strategy, or decision rule—a specification of what to do in any situation that may arise<sup>7</sup>--of mutual cooperation. Now the question is, how? How have they managed to achieve mutual cooperation when both should be inclined to defect, unilaterally taking advantage of the other's cooperation?

### **Theory & Methodology:**

One of the most cited and foundational works for the study of game theory and collective action is Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, which was the first publication to challenge the instinctive assumption of group inclination to cooperate based on common interest(s). Instead, he proposed the theory of collective action problems and the problem of public goods. Olson thoroughly examines the logic behind collective action and how it pertains to economists, political scientists, sociologists, and other scholars when looking at group dynamics and rational human interaction. He shows

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 1984

that individuals in groups are more incentivized to work unilaterally for themselves than for a shared goal. Oftentimes collective action problems involve public goods, which are non-excludable and non-rivalrous, meaning (a) no one can be excluded from benefitting (or suffering) from the good, and (b) the consumption of the good by one member does not affect consumption by someone else. In these cases, there are issues of burden sharing and free-riding. In the example of Syria, the defeat of the Islamic State can be considered a public good, but determining contributions to the fight against IS is a burden sharing problem. Countries, especially Russia who has specific interests in the war that it would rather pursue, are inclined to free-ride—benefit from the good with minimal commitment to its achievement. From this central book published in 1965 came extensive scholarship and literature on collective action problems and selective incentives.

Mancur Olson focuses on several possible solutions to the Prisoner's Dilemma. He predominantly suggests that selective incentives—“incentives that may be used to mobilize a latent group”<sup>8</sup>—are the primary way to solve a PD. Selective incentives can be almost any private good that changes the individual's preferences and makes them more inclined to cooperate than defect. Selective incentives may be economic, political, or social. However, this explanation is insufficient to understanding cooperation between the United States and Russia in Syria. Russia has not offered the United States any special concessions or rewards for cooperation in Syria, nor has the United States offered Russia selective incentives. Thus, Olson's theory is insufficient to understanding the Russian-American PD in Syria, and there must be another phenomenon that has solved the IPD.

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<sup>8</sup> Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, 1965, pg. 61

The situation in Syria is more compatible with Richard Axelrod's *The Evolution of Cooperation*. Axelrod's theory "is based upon an investigation of individuals who pursue their own self-interest without the aid of a central authority to force them to cooperate with each other."<sup>9</sup> In the case of Russia and the US, both countries are pursuing their own self-interest (whether it be cooperating to defeat IS or defecting unilaterally to exploit the other) without the influence or enforcement of a central authority. Washington and Moscow are both rational actors and sovereign nations, not subject to any central authority or governing body. Both players are free to make whatever choices they want, including the choice to defect. The international community cannot force the two to cooperate, and they are able to spiral into a continuous stream of mutual defection if they wanted. Simply, the international system is defined by *de jure* anarchy and *de facto* hierarchy. The state of *de jure* anarchy means that the global order is inherently without and primary authority; the state of *de facto* hierarchy motivates countries to work towards obtaining their goals and improve their standing in the system relative to others. Therefore, Axelrod's theory appropriately applies to international cooperation issues, like the situation in Syria between Russia and the United States.

Thus, although Olson creates the general foundation for the case study, Axelrod and James Morrow have produced theories that provide a more specific and appropriate framework for American-Russian relations in Syria. Morrow's *Game Theory for Political Scientists*<sup>10</sup> provides interesting insights into deterrence and reciprocity mechanisms that will be discussed later. These theories establish the groundwork for analysis of cooperation between the US and Russia in Syria.

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 1984, pg. 6

<sup>10</sup> James Morrow, *Game Theory for Political Scientists*, 1994

Instead of selective incentives, the explanation for cooperation between the United States and Russia stems from credible deterrence and effective punishment strategies utilized in an *iterated* Prisoner's Dilemma (IPD) game. An IPD exists when a game between two players continues indefinitely, neither knowing when or how it will end, and each player learns from past decisions and considers repercussions for future iterations. Therefore, there is always the possibility of continued interaction and consequently the possibility of mutual cooperation. In a PD with a definite, known number of moves and iterations, it is almost impossible to develop mutual cooperation because the two sides will be rationally inclined to exploit the other as much as possible. So the nature of the US-Russia relationship and its inevitable future is critical to the development of cooperation between the two powers.

In order to apply the collective theoretical framework provided by Olson, Axelrod, and Morrow to the Syria case study, articles from prominent, internationally credible news organizations were collected and analyzed (including *The New York Times*, *CNN*, *BBC*, *Reuters*, *The Atlantic*, *Al Jazeera*, etc.). The primary sources of data on the situation in Syria include the media, reports from the US Department of Defense and US Department of State, as well as the United Nations. Although the contextual argument covers the Syrian war from its beginning in 2011 to current events as they unfold in 2018, the analysis focuses on the 'game' between US and Russia from the US's intervention in 2014 to the near-defeat of IS by the end of 2017.

### **Mancur Olson's Game Theory and Collective Action:**

*"If the members of some group have a common interest or objective, and if they would all be better off if that objective were achieved, it has been thought to follow logically that the*

*individuals in that group would, if they were rational and self-interested, act to achieve that objective.”<sup>11</sup>*

It is intuitive to believe that a group of actors with the same interests and goals would be inclined to cooperate and work together effectively to achieve these goals. This theory equates individual decision-making with group decision-making. Specifically, it assumes that groups act based on group interest much like individuals act in accordance with their individual self-interests. Perhaps this should make sense. If actors X, Y, and Z all want the exact same thing, they should theoretically all cooperate and act in ways that invariably help the group meet its shared goal. Because the group wants to achieve a specific outcome, X, Y, and Z should also want to meet this specific outcome because it serves their individual self-interest.

However, this is not how actors actually interact in group settings. Even the most rational, self-interested actors working to achieve a collective goal that benefits themselves individually will not voluntarily act towards the achievement of the group goal. There are a few crucial things to note from Olson’s following assertion regarding the topic of collective action and the zero-contribution theory:

“If the members of a large group rationally seek to maximize their personal welfare, they will not act to advance their common or group objectives unless there is coercion to force them to do so, or unless some special incentive, distinct from the achievement of the common or group interest, is offered to the members of the group individually on the condition that they help bear the costs or burdens involved in the achievement of the group objective.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, 1965, pg. 1

<sup>12</sup> Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, 1965, pg. 2

First, groups composed of rational, self-interested actors will not cooperate exclusively on the basis of group/common interest, even if there is unanimity regarding the ultimate goal and how to achieve it. Second, the only ways to solve collective action problems and achieve cooperation towards a collective goal include: (1) coercion—the use of force or threats to make a group or actor do something(s) it would otherwise not do, and (2) selective incentives— “private goods made available to [individuals] on the basis of whether they contribute to a collective good. Selective incentives can either reward participants or punish nonparticipants.”<sup>13</sup> Third, the selective incentives must be separate from the group goal.

However, Olson’s theory does not exclusively solve the Syria puzzle. In the case of Syria, there is no third party with enough power or leverage to coerce the US or Russia, and no private goods are being offered to either side for cooperation.

### **Robert Axelrod’s Cooperation Theory**

*“Today nations interact without central authority. Therefore, the requirements for the emergence of cooperation have relevance to many other central issues of international politics. The most important problem is the security dilemma: nations often seek their own security through means which challenge the security of others. This problem arises in such areas as escalation of local conflicts and arms races.”*<sup>14</sup>

Robert Axelrod’s theory, as presented in *The Evolution of Cooperation* is a better framework for analyzing the IPD between Russia and the US in Syria and the mutual

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<sup>13</sup> Pamela Oliver, “Selective Incentives,” 2013

<sup>14</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 1984, pg. 4

cooperation established between the opposing coalitions. Axelrod's book establishes "Cooperation Theory based upon an investigation of individuals who pursue their own self-interest without the aid of a central authority to force them to cooperate with each other."<sup>15</sup> In Syria, both the United States and Russia are considered self-interested actors, and since the international system is defined by *de jure* anarchy, there is no central authority to enforce cooperation or force either sovereign state to act in a certain way. Additionally, Axelrod argues that concern for others, trust, and amicability do not completely solve the Prisoner's Dilemma—other factors are required.

Axelrod defines a PD as a situation in which:

1. The order of the four payoffs from best to worst is: (1) the temptation to defect when other player cooperates (T), (2) the reward for mutual cooperation (R), (3) punishment for mutual defection (P), and finally (4) the sucker's payoff for cooperating when the other player defects (S).
2. Players cannot get out of the dilemma by taking turns exploiting each other, since the reward for mutual cooperation is greater than the average of the temptation payoff and sucker's payoff.

And the possibility of cooperation requires that:

1. There is an indefinite number of interactions; players must know that they might meet again.
2. Players can remember other actors and former interactions.

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 1984, pg. 6



3. Choices today affect the outcome of this iteration and the outcomes of the next ones.

Axelrod concludes that when interacting with other players, it is beneficial to be nice (not the first to defect), forgiving (willing to forgive defections to establish mutual cooperation in the future), and retaliatory (responsive to others' defections to prevent future exploitation and build a credible reputation of punishment and reciprocity). In the long term, it often hurts an actor to constantly attempt to exploit, especially if that actor is willing to utilize punishment mechanisms. He also asserts that a player's reputation is defined by other players' beliefs about its strategy; thus, reputation greatly affects how players play in an IPD, and reputation is established through actions and responses during the game.

### **The Prisoner's Dilemma:**

*"This basic problem exists when the pursuit of self-interest leads to a poor outcome for all.... What is best for each person individually leads to mutual defection, whereas everyone would have been better off with mutual cooperation."*<sup>16</sup>

One of the most commonly addressed and foundational collective action problems in game theory is the Prisoner's Dilemma. The Prisoner's Dilemma is a two-player non-zero-sum game utilized across social science disciplines that is defined by two strategies: cooperation and defection. Zero-sum games are those in which a gain for one side inevitably means a loss for another. Therefore, there is only pure competition and no opportunity for cooperation or mutual

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 1984, pg. 7, 9

benefit. The two sides completely oppose one another.<sup>17</sup> In a non-zero-sum game, however, there is chance for cooperation to develop because there is some common interest or goal, or there is a way for both sides to simultaneously benefit. In the case of the US and Russia in Syria, even though they have different interests in the outcome of the war and future of Syria, they have a common enemy in the Islamic State and a shared goal of defeating the organization. Therefore, the game is not zero-sum. Both sides can benefit concurrently, and a gain for the US does not necessarily equate a loss for Russia, and vice versa.

There are three types of outcomes in a Prisoner's Dilemma and four payoff categories. The outcome types include: 1) cooperation, 2) defection, or 3) exploitation. Cooperation occurs when both sides cooperate; defection occurs when both sides defect; and exploitation occurs when one side defects while the other cooperates. It is important to remember three major points: 1) players cannot get out of the IPD by taking turns exploiting each other; 2) reward for mutual cooperation is greater than the average of the temptation and sucker's payoff; 3) there is no reason for cooperation to exist if there are a known finite number of interactions, but it can emerge when there are an indefinite number of iterations. The players must be able to recognize and remember other actors and former interactions with them, and they need to believe the choices they make have short-term and long-term consequences.<sup>18</sup>

“We can name the payoffs in game 2  $T > R > P > S$ , where T is the temptation, R is the reward for mutual cooperation, P is the punishment for mutual defection, and S is the sucker's payoff. It is conventional to also assume that  $R > (T + P)/2$ . Without this, then alternating rounds between cooperation and defection leads to a greater payoff than pure cooperation.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 1984; James D. Morrow, *Game Theory for Political Scientists*, 1994

<sup>18</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 1994

<sup>19</sup> James Holland Jones, “Evolutionary Game Theory,” Department of Anthropology at Stanford University, 1 December 2008

In order to clarify the IPD model, there are two scenarios below, one dealing with the classic prisoner story and the other dealing more specifically with international relations.

Scenario 1: Assume Criminals A and B rob a bank. They are arrested and interrogated separately. In the separate interrogation rooms, each individual is promised a deal if they cooperate with the police and defect against their partner in crime. The cost-benefit chart is shown below. The numbers represent the number of years each criminal would spend in jail, depending on if they cooperated or defected. Higher numbers signify a worse outcome. The two options for each criminal are to either cooperate (C) or defect (D).

### **The Prisoner's Dilemma: Interrogation**

		Criminal B	
		C	D
Criminal A	C	2yrs, 2yrs	6yrs, 0yrs
	D	0yrs, 6yrs	5yrs, 5yrs

When carefully analyzing the cost-benefit analysis of the criminals, it is clear that regardless of what the other player does, it is in the self-interest of both criminals to defect and turn the partner into the cops. This means that the Nash equilibrium of the game is mutual defection since neither player has incentive to switch strategies. Regardless of Criminal A's

decision, it is in Criminal B's interest to defect, and vice versa. However, the social optimum achieved by mutual cooperation is better for both actors than mutual defection.

Scenario 2: This Prisoner's Dilemma scenario deals more closely with wartime cooperation. The below diagram<sup>20</sup> establishes the initial payoffs for cooperation and defection in terms of Axelrod's T, S, R, P categories. "The prisoner's dilemma game is defined such that the payoff to a defector playing against a cooperator is greatest; the payoff of mutual cooperation is next greatest; the payoff for mutual defection is next greatest; and the payoff to cooperating when the opponent defects is least."<sup>21</sup>

### The Prisoner's Dilemma: Axelrod

		Actor B	
		C	D
Actor A	C	R=3, R=3 Reward for Mutual Cooperation	S=0, T=5 Sucker's Payoff and Temptation to Defect
	D	T=5, S=0 Temptation to Defect and Sucker's Payoff	P=1, P=1 Punishment for Mutual Defection

This diagram shows that the best option for each individual player is to defect while the other cooperates and receive the temptation payoff. It also highlights that the Nash equilibrium of the game—the strategy that neither actor has incentive to change unilaterally—is mutual

<sup>20</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, pg. 8

<sup>21</sup> James Holland Jones, *Evolutionary Game Theory*, Department of Anthropology Stanford University, 1 December 2008

defection. However, the reward for mutual cooperation is still better than the payoff of mutual defection. Looking at the US and Russia, this model is applicable because each side can benefit most by exploiting the other's cooperation, both sides are incentivized to mutually defect in an attempt to achieve their respective goals in Syria, but they have managed to achieve cooperation against the Islamic State and avoid war with one another. The threat of war enables them to multilaterally adjust their strategy and cooperate.

### Why the Prisoner's Dilemma?

There are many two-player games in game theory, and several are similar to the Prisoner's Dilemma but have different pay-off matrices. So why is the Prisoner's Dilemma the best model for US-Russian relations in Syria? Two of the closest competitors to the PD model are discussed below. One of these games is called Chicken, and the payoff matrix looks like this, where C denotes "continue straight" and S denotes "swerve:"

#### Chicken: Nuclear Annihilation

		Player B	
		C	S
Player A	C	-100, -100	2, -2
	S	-2, 2	0, 0

As the name suggests, the point of the game is to exploit the other player's cowardice while avoiding destruction. The only way to receive a positive payoff is by continuing straight while the other swerves (exploitation). It can be seen as an example of brinkmanship, testing how far the other person is willing to go before reaching direct confrontation. Neither side benefits from both swerving, they just avoid a possibly catastrophic outcome. In this case, assume that two truck drivers are headed full-speed directly towards each other. Either they will collide, they will both swerve to avoid each other, or one will change direction to avoid collision while the other continues straight. Neither player wants both players to continue straight because that is the worst possible outcome for both of them  $(-100, -100)$ . Each player, however, wants to continue straight while the other swerves because that is the biggest payoff for each of them—the only possible positive payoff, actually. In this game, there are two pure-strategy Nash equilibriums at  $(-2, 2)$  and  $(2, -2)$ . When calculating the mixed strategy Nash Equilibrium, about  $1/50$  times player A will choose to go straight and  $1/50$  times Player B will choose to go straight.<sup>22</sup> Because of the threat of head-on collision, most of the time the two players will both swerve and not gain or lose anything.

The argument for Chicken in Syria is founded on the fact that the US and Russia are both nuclear powers and assumes that war between the two powers automatically means nuclear annihilation. Based on this assumption, Washington and Moscow constantly swerve to avoid mutually assured destruction. Perhaps from a macro-perspective, the threat of war between countries with nuclear weapons is a game of Chicken; however, a micro-analysis of the game in Syria shows US-Russia relations are not a game of Chicken.

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<sup>22</sup> William Spaniel, Game Theory 101: Chicken, *Game Theory 101: The Complete Textbook*, 2011

The game in Syria is not Chicken because neither side is willing to go to nuclear war over Syria, both sides can benefit without just exploiting each other, and the US and Russia have opportunities to protect themselves and react to the other side. The deterrence used by both Washington and Moscow is not based on nuclear annihilation but rather conventional warfare between the two sides. Syria is not a hinge in the international balance of power, the country has been effectively destroyed by its civil war, and the US and Russia have different priorities that can be reconciled short of nuclear conflict. Furthermore, there are ways both coalitions benefit in Syria that do not involve unilateral exploitation (e.g. through cooperation against the Islamic State). The situation in Syria between the American coalition and Russian coalition is different than Chicken because even though they are intentionally avoiding the catastrophe of war, each side defects more frequently than would be reasonable in a game of Chicken. In a game of Chicken, it is likely that they would have collided in war already. However, because they believe the threat of war is credible and can retaliate to and protect themselves against minor defections, they cooperate instead of directly fight.

If Syria was a game of Chicken, knowing about the threat of war—especially nuclear war—would lead the great powers to simultaneously swerve almost every time, which is not the case in Syria. Each side commits minor defections regularly, to the point that defections on a limited scale are expected. Additionally, there have been confrontations between the two sides that have not resulted in war; whereas in chicken, the direct confrontation is war. There has still been conflict, but the two have not developed a pattern of escalation. Additionally, the defeat of the Islamic State, which would be a result of both sides ‘swerving,’ does not have a payoff of zero for either country. It is a social optimum, which means the world in general benefits from the organization’s destruction. Therefore, the US and Russia is still an IPD.

Moreover, the primary supporting argument for using Chicken as the model for Syria is that both the US and Russia are nuclear powers, and therefore, the payoff matrix recognizes the collision of the two actors as nuclear war. This assumption, however, implies that direct conflict between the two states would lead to nuclear war. First of all, there has been direct conflict between the US military and Russian mercenaries, which did not escalate into any military confrontation.<sup>23</sup> So, conflict has already arisen without nuclear destruction (and conventional warfare, for that matter). A war between the US and Russia in Syria would not necessarily escalate into a nuclear war, either, especially since Syria is not a high-stakes enough actor. If Syria was a hinge in great power politics, maybe the threat would be greater, but Russian presence in Syria is not new and Assad's likely victory will not shift the status quo system. The conflict Washington and Moscow are avoiding involves the clash of American and Russian military forces on a non-nuclear level.

On a large-scale perhaps war between two nuclear powers is always a game of Chicken to an extent, however, individual scenarios that involve nuclear powers are not necessarily games of Chicken. The most notable Chicken scenario between nuclear powers existed between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War post-World War II. The period from 1946-1981 marks a time of global fear and credible nuclear threats. The US and Russia were both rising powers armed with nuclear weapons in a re-stabilizing international system, both vying for influence in their respective spheres but—more importantly—throughout the world. Also, each side believed the other was capable and willing to use its nuclear arsenal if necessary. The Cold War resulted from intra-coalition rivalry among the victors of World War II because of fundamental

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<sup>23</sup> Adam Taylor, "What we know about the shadowy Russian mercenary firm behind an attack on U.S. troops in Syria," *The Washington Post*, 23 February 2018



disagreement regarding the splitting of the spoils and the establishment of a new international order. Conflict within victorious coalitions is not uncommon, especially when coalitions are large and there is no great power anchor. In this case, two major actors in the coalition were competing for the status of great-power anchor/hegemon, and they both had nuclear weapons as leverage.

Syria is not another Cold War or a major nuclear threat. Even though there is threat of war between the US and Russia, the scale is much smaller, and neither power is interested in pushing the other to the edge. Syria is not important enough to either side's foreign policy to justify using nuclear weapons, even in a military skirmish between the two states. One main difference is that the two countries are already established powers. Granted, Russia's power may be increasing and the US's power and influence is arguably decreasing, the shift in power is not great enough to incite nuclear violence, and the United States remains the hegemon for now. Russia is not aiming to destroy the US; Russia wants parity with the US. Additionally, the two powers are interested in Syria for influence in the region, not the whole world, and quite frankly, Russia has already effectively won that battle. Syria is predominantly destroyed, and it looks almost indisputably like Assad will remain in power, which means Russia will remain influential in the country. Moreover, there is no shortage of animosity against the United States in the MENA region, so its influence is already decreasing without the involvement of Russia (and fighting a costly war in Syria to regain American influence would just be bad politics considering its wars have been the main detriments to its reputation in the first place). Thus, in the Cold War, the world was broken down into two large and easily susceptible spheres of influence, which is different than the current geopolitical situation.

The US-Russia power struggle in the Middle East is actually more centralized on the issues between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Considering the status of the Iran Nuclear Deal and Saudi Arabia's new prerogative to gain nuclear weapons if Iran does,<sup>24</sup> that situation is likely to be more of a Chicken situation than Syria. Additionally, there is no arms race in Syria. The war has been predominantly conventional, the only exceptions being chemical weapons utilized by the Syrian regime.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, neither the US nor Russia have made threats to use nuclear weapons, whereas in the Cold War, the threats of nuclear attacks were constant and believed to be very real.

Syria, moreover, is just a proxy for the two powers' greater foreign policy interests (which do not in either case involve nuclear annihilation). The United States wants regime change, and Russia wants Assad's Moscow-friendly government and continued access to military bases in the country. Neither country is looking for the destruction of the other, which is different than the Cold War, where the destruction/defeat of the other side was each state's primary foreign policy goal. Although both sides are using mostly the same proxies in the Middle East as they did in the Cold War (the US being more successful with Sunni governments like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while Moscow has been more successful exerting influence in the Shi'a regimes like Syria and Iran), but neither Russia nor the US are threatening nuclear war over these proxies. In Syria, they have a common enemy that unites them to some extent (the Islamic State), and Washington and Moscow are more focused on the Syrian war than on the military defeat of the other.

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<sup>24</sup> Joshua Berlinger, "Saudi Arabia warns it will pursue nuclear weapons if Iran does," *CNN*, 15 March 2018; *BBC*, "Saudi Arabia pledges to create a nuclear bomb if Iran does," 15 March 2018

<sup>25</sup> *Al Jazeera*, "Chemical attacks in Syria: Since 2013, thousands of Syrians have been injured and hundreds killed by chemical warfare," 14 April 2018

Additionally, when caught in a game of Chicken, neither side has the opportunity to protect itself from the other. When the two cars are accelerating towards each other, they cannot react to the other's move. The only interaction between the two actors is complete destruction. In an IPD, however, the two sides can and do protect themselves from exploitation by the other and are given opportunities to react appropriately to defection. Mutual defection in Syria has not and will not be immediate nuclear annihilation. In fact, following the American and Russian response to direct conflict between the US military and Russian mercenaries, it will not even be conventional warfare. Therefore, the game the US and Russia are caught within in Syria is not Chicken but rather a Prisoner's Dilemma where each side exploits the other only to the extent that the other side will (likely reciprocate and) forgive.

The Cold War was clearly a game of Chicken because it was defined by Brinkmanship, and each side swerved even when threatened (like in the Cuban Missile Crisis) to avoid a full-scale nuclear war with mutually assured destruction. The Syrian civil war may involve two nuclear powers (roughly the same nuclear powers—the United States and Russia), but it does not tempt either to use nuclear weapons. Therefore, the war in Syria is a Prisoner's Dilemma marked by defections that could lead to conventional military conflict between the US and Russia. The current game the US and Russia are trapped in is focused on conventional warfare, not nuclear war. Their cost-benefit analyses definitely include the acknowledgment that the other side has nuclear weapons, but they are not thinking about nuclear reciprocity or escalation for conventional defections. In fact, the recently re-elected Russian President Putin stated that he is

opposed to any arms race in the future and wants to work with other countries in diplomatic ways to deal with international issues.<sup>26</sup>

Another possible game worth exploring is the Hawk-Dove game, which is a spin-off of Chicken. In this game, there are two players that can either choose to be hawk-like or dove-like. Hawks always fight and doves always concede to a fight. When a hawk and dove meet, the hawk takes full advantage of the dove, who backs down. When two doves meet, they cooperate and split the resource/good. When two hawks meet, they each have a 50% chance of beating the other, and each of them incurs costs in the fight, and “the cost of the conflict reduces individual fitness by some constant value  $c$ .”<sup>27</sup> In the table below,  $v$  represents the resource both players desire and  $c$  represents the cost incurred. Both  $v$  and  $c$  are greater than zero.<sup>28</sup>

		<b>Hawk-Dove: Exploitation</b>	
		Player B	
		Hawk	Dove
Player A	Hawk	$(v/2)-c, (v/2)-c$	$v, 0$
	Dove	$0, v$	$v/2, v/2$

<sup>26</sup> BBC, “بوتين في أول تصريح بعد إعادة انتخابه: لن يكون هناك سباق تسلح,” [Translated] “Putin’s First Speech After re-election: there will not be an arms race,” 19 March 2018; *Al Jazeera*, “Putin Tells West he has no ‘plans to accelerate an arms race,’” 20 March 2018

<sup>27</sup> *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “Evolutionary Game Theory,” 19 July 2009

<sup>28</sup> James Holland Jones, “Evolutionary Game Theory,” Department of Anthropology at Stanford University, 1 December 2008

In this game, if one player plays dove, it makes sense for the other player to exploit it and play hawk because  $v > v/2$ . If  $v/2 - c > 0$ , then both players are incentivized to play hawk, and the (Hawk, Hawk) outcome represents the game's equilibrium. If  $v/2 - c < 0$ , then there are two pure strategy Nash equilibria: (Dove, Hawk) and (Hawk, Dove). The mixed strategy equilibrium is such that Player A and Player B both play Hawk with probability  $v/2c$ .<sup>29</sup>

Although it may initially seem reasonable to consider the relationship between the US and Russia in Syria an example of the Hawk-Dove game because the two sides are incentivized to exploit each other, there are a few shortcomings that make the Prisoner's Dilemma a more appropriate theoretical application. In this game, both sides choosing to be doves, maintaining peace and splitting an outcome, is better for each player than both sides fighting. After all,  $v/2$  is always greater than  $(v/2) - c$ . In the case of Washington and Moscow, splitting the outcome of defeating the Islamic State is better than fighting each other. However, attacking the Islamic State still requires cost, usually distributed unevenly with the US carrying the greatest burden. Also, the defeat of IS is a public good, which means that its payoff is not  $v/2$  since public goods are non-excludable and non-rivalrous. A public good cannot be split.

Additionally, neither side maintains dove status when taken advantage of by the other's hawk-like decisions, but when they are both hawk-like, there is no direct conflict. There is almost always some form of reciprocity to remind the other side a player can be a hawk too. But this reciprocity is not a (Hawk, Hawk) outcome because they are avoiding war through retaliation, not initiating or escalating it. Because both the US and Russia are involved militarily in Syria, they often play hawks, but they manage to avoid directly fighting each other. Additionally, each side is almost always enduring costs. There is never a simple half-half split or

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<sup>29</sup> William Spaniel, *Game Theory 101: The Complete Textbook*, 2011

consumption of an entire resource because they are both involved in the fighting, and fighting is costly. Therefore, it would be a misrepresentation of the actual payoffs in the US-Russia game to use this Hawk-Dove model. The point is that the two countries and their coalitions are not at war with each other.

So, the Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma is the appropriate game theory model to address the game between the US and Russia in Syria because it directly deals with cooperation and defection and can be solved with deterrence and punishment strategies. The payoff matrix is most comparable to the one in Syria between the two coalitions.

## II. The War in Syria & Credible Deterrence

### Syrian Civil War:

The civil war in Syria has been a prominent American foreign policy issue since it began in March 2011. The war escalated from an Arab Spring uprising into an internationalized intrastate war involving ethnic factions, Islamic terrorist groups, rebels, government forces, and great power intervention. Underlying causes of the war include economic, political, and civil instability as well as sectarian division within the country. Some of the proximate causes of the war include the influx of Syrians into urban areas because of drought, the other uprisings throughout the Arab World (including those in Tunisia and Egypt), and the arrest and brutal torture of teenage boys who used graffiti to publicize anti-regime rhetoric on a school building.<sup>30</sup>

After President Bashar al-Assad's regime responded violently to suppress dissent in the country, military defectors formed a rebel faction—the Free Syrian Army—and the country descended into a civil war that quickly gained additional actors who wanted to take advantage of the instability. More rebel factions formed to oppose Assad but also began fighting each other, and the Islamic State entered the conflict fighting everyone. Sectarian issues also surfaced in the country that is 80% Sunni Muslim but has been dominated by the Alawi sect of Shia Islam for decades, and Islamist rebel factions involved themselves in the struggle for state power.<sup>31</sup> What began as a pro-Assad versus anti-Assad war transformed into a sectarian and international issue,

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<sup>30</sup> *CNN Library*, "Syrian Civil War Fast Facts," 3 May 2018; William R. Polk, "Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad; How drought, foreign meddling, and long-festered religious tensions created the tragically splintered Syria we know today," *The Atlantic*, 10 December 2013

<sup>31</sup> William R. Polk, "Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad; How drought, foreign meddling, and long-festered religious tensions created the tragically splintered Syria we know today," *The Atlantic*, 10 December 2013

dividing rebel forces against each other based on Sunni-Shia lines and involving state actors in the complicated conglomerate of fighters in Syria.

Since its escalation, the country has witnessed grave atrocities throughout the center-driven civil war, including war crimes and crimes against humanity.<sup>32</sup> The pre-war population in 2010 was 21.02 million people. As of December 2017, urgent humanitarian assistance, including medical assistance, was required by more than 13.1 million people in Syria, of whom 6.1 million were internally displaced, 2.9 million were living in hard-to-reach areas, including Palestinian refugees, and hundreds of thousands of civilians were trapped in besieged areas.<sup>33</sup> In total, almost 500,000 civilians have been killed, over 11 million displaced, and 13.5 million are in need of humanitarian assistance. Major actors that have opposed Assad's regime also oppose IS, including the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, Israel, and the Arab League.<sup>34</sup> The American coalition and Russian coalition are at odds with each other because they do not agree on the outcome of the civil war and oppose each other's influence in the Middle East region.

Syria is not the only country in the MENA region experiencing civil war and humanitarian crises. In fact, the UN has referred to the situation in Yemen as "the world's worst humanitarian crisis."<sup>35</sup> The internationalized version of civil war in Yemen—sometimes referred to as the 'forgotten war'—has been going on since 2015, killed over 10,000 people, and displaced

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<sup>32</sup> *UN News*, "Those responsible for war crimes in Syria 'will be held accountable for what they have done,' says UN rights chief," 2 March 2018; Lizzie Dearden, "Syria conflict: UN report accuses Assad regime of massacres and crimes against humanity," *The Independent*, 27 August 2014

<sup>33</sup> UNSC Resolution 2393, 19 December 2017

<sup>34</sup> *BBC*, "Syria crisis: Where key countries stand," 30 October 2015; *The Guardian*, "Syria: who are the key players in the conflict?," 14 April 2018; *The Global Coalition*, "75 Partners," 2014

<sup>35</sup> Ewelina U. Ochab, "Yemen Became The World's Worst Humanitarian Crisis," *Forbes*, 5 April 2018; Shuaib Almosawa, Ben Hubbard, and Troy Griggs, "'It's a Slow Death': The World's Worst Humanitarian Crisis," *The New York Times*, 23 August 2017



about 3 million Yemenis.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, Syria remains the focus of international attention and US foreign policy because of larger American interest, and Syria involves Russia—another great power. The United States and Russia have historically struggled against one another to gain influence in the MENA part of the world, especially for access to oil resources, military advantages, and political alliances. The war in Syria is no exception. Although, the Trump administration has made some policy changes that indicate the US may be rethinking its role in the Syrian war and pulling out of the conflict, it has been a major direct and indirect actor in the war.

The major players in Syria can be broken down into six categories: the Syrian army, secular rebels, Islamist rebels, Kurds, IS, and the anti-ISIS coalition(s). The Syrian army is led by President Bashar al-Assad and has almost completely taken back the parts of the country once dominated by rebel forces. The Free Syrian Army is a sectarian rebel group formed in 2011 by Syrian military defectors to oppose Assad and overthrow the government.<sup>37</sup> The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

“is a coalition of Kurdish, Sunni Arab and Syriac Christian fighters dominated by its Kurdish fighters, especially the Popular Defense Units (YPG) with an all-female branch called the Women’s Defense Units, or YPJ. These organizations are Syrian front groups for the Kurdistan Workers’ Party or PKK. The other militias involved in the Syrian Democratic Forces are either long-standing PKK allies or proxies...or more recent allies drawn from the Sunni Arab tribal landscape...and from the remains of small Sunni Arab rebel groups crushed by the Islamic State.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Al Jazeera*, “Key facts about the war in Yemen,” 25 Mar 2018

<sup>37</sup> *Al Jazeera*, “Syria’s Civil War Explained from the Beginning,” 14 April 2018

<sup>38</sup> Aron Lund, “Origins of the Syrian Democratic Forces: A Primer,” 22 January 2016

The SDF has received substantial air support from the United States. Although both of these organized militias oppose Assad, the two forces also fight one another because they too are in competition for power.

The other fighters include the Kurds in northern Syria, the Islamic State, and the anti-ISIS coalition(s). The Kurds fighting in Syria have attempted to take advantage of the instability and take parts of the country as their own, highlighting a more separatist aspect of the overall civil war. IS has been determined to create an Islamic Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, and at its height in 2014, it controlled “land stretching from central Syria all the way to the outskirts of Baghdad including major cities like Mosul, Fallujah, Tikrit, and Raqqa”<sup>39</sup> and approximately 10 million people.<sup>40</sup> The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, led by the United States has worked to contain and destroy the terrorist organization. Although it has lost most of its ‘caliphate,’ its fighters are still active in Syria and internationally. Figure 1 divides the country based on territorial control in Syria.

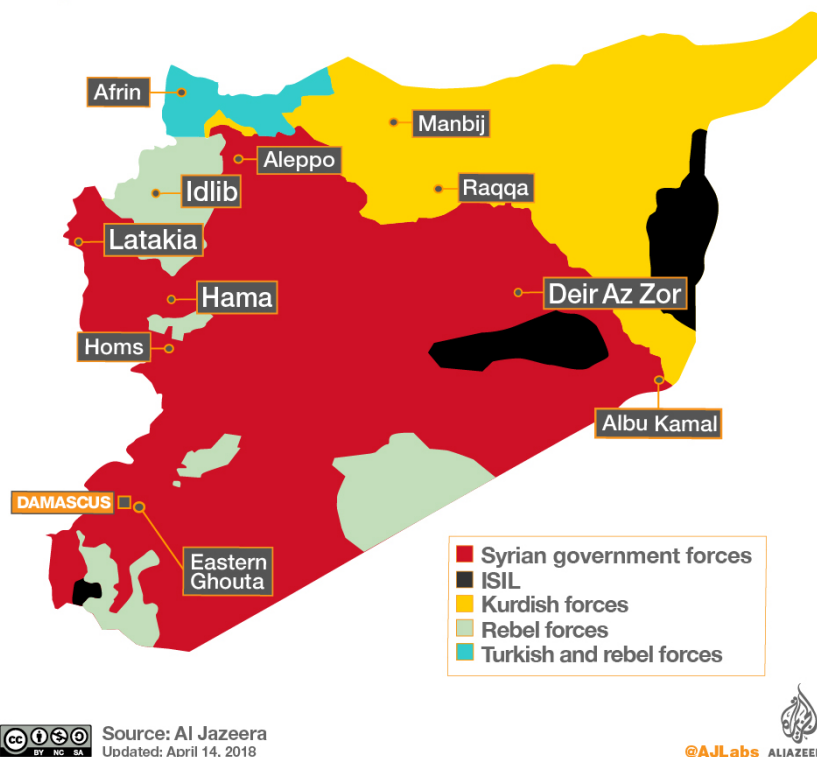
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<sup>39</sup> Michal Kranz and Skye Gould, “These maps show how drastically ISIS territory has shrunk since its peak,” 24 October 2017

<sup>40</sup> BBC, “Islamic State and the crisis in Iraq and Syria in maps,” 28 March 2018

Figure 1: Control of Territory in Syria<sup>41</sup>

## Syria: Who controls what?



Therefore, there are four overlapping conflicts in Syria. The main conflict is between the Assad regime and the rebels. The second conflict involves the secessionist Kurds, who have been fighting the Syrian government and rebel forces, as well as contributing (arguably the most) to the US's campaign against IS. Now they are also fighting Turkey. The third conflict is the Islamic State and its fighting to create a state for itself. Finally, the fourth conflict is the internationalized aspect of the civil war, involving Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and the US and its

<sup>41</sup> *Al Jazeera*, "Syrian civil war map: Who's in control where," 15 April 2018

allies.<sup>42</sup> Iran was the first to enter the fray in support of Syria, and when the rebels started gaining momentum, Russia joined the war to prop-up Assad and (it claims) to fight IS in 2015. This fourth conflict involving international powers and intervention is what allows the fight against the Islamic State in Syria to be considered a Prisoner's Dilemma. The US and Russian coalitions are deeply rooted in all of the aforementioned issues as adversaries, but they have managed to cooperate against the Islamic State.

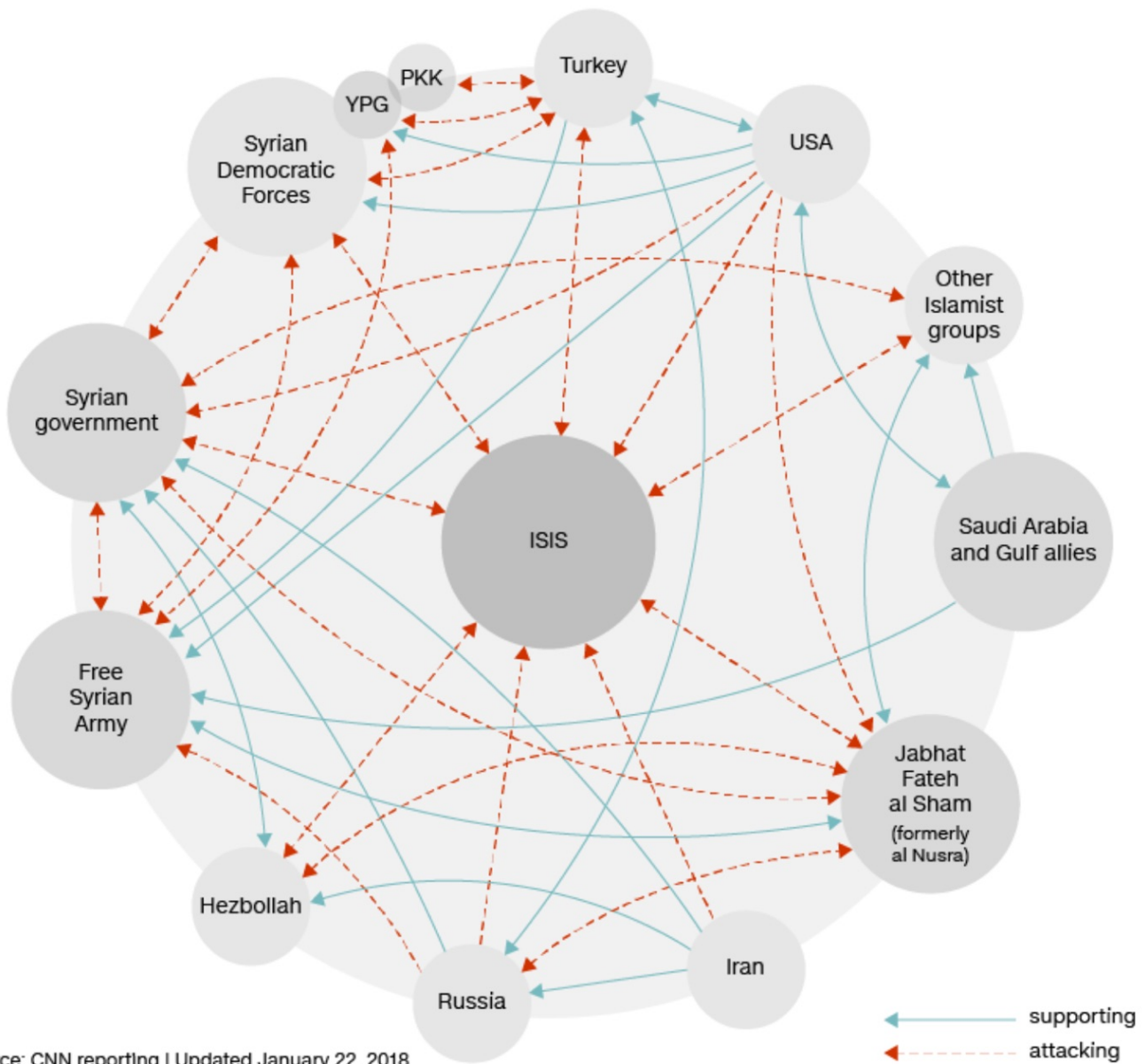
The presence of the Islamic State in the Syrian conflict causes a pervasive collective action problem among the many forces fighting against it, especially since many of them are also fighting each other. The international community universally agrees that the Islamic State is a dangerous terrorist organization that must be destroyed, but individual actors and coalitions have played larger roles in the fight against IS than others. Neither the US nor Russia (the two major powers in the conflict) have wanted to work exclusively towards the destruction of IS. All warring factions in Syria agree that IS should be destroyed; however, none want to bear the costs of expelling/destroying it if they can free-ride instead. The public good is the destruction of IS, and the collective action problem comes down to burden sharing.

The United States and its global coalition, as well as the Kurds, have contributed the most to the fight against the Islamic State in Syria. Figures 2 and 3 show the different actors fighting IS and how much territory the terrorist organization has lost since its peak. According to the CNN, the “head-spinning” web of actors in Syria fighting the IS looks like Figure 2.

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<sup>42</sup> Max Fisher, “Straightforward Answers to Basic Questions About Syria’s War,” *The New York Times*, 18 September 2016

**Figure 2: Alliance and Opposition Networks in Syria Fighting the Islamic State<sup>43</sup>**

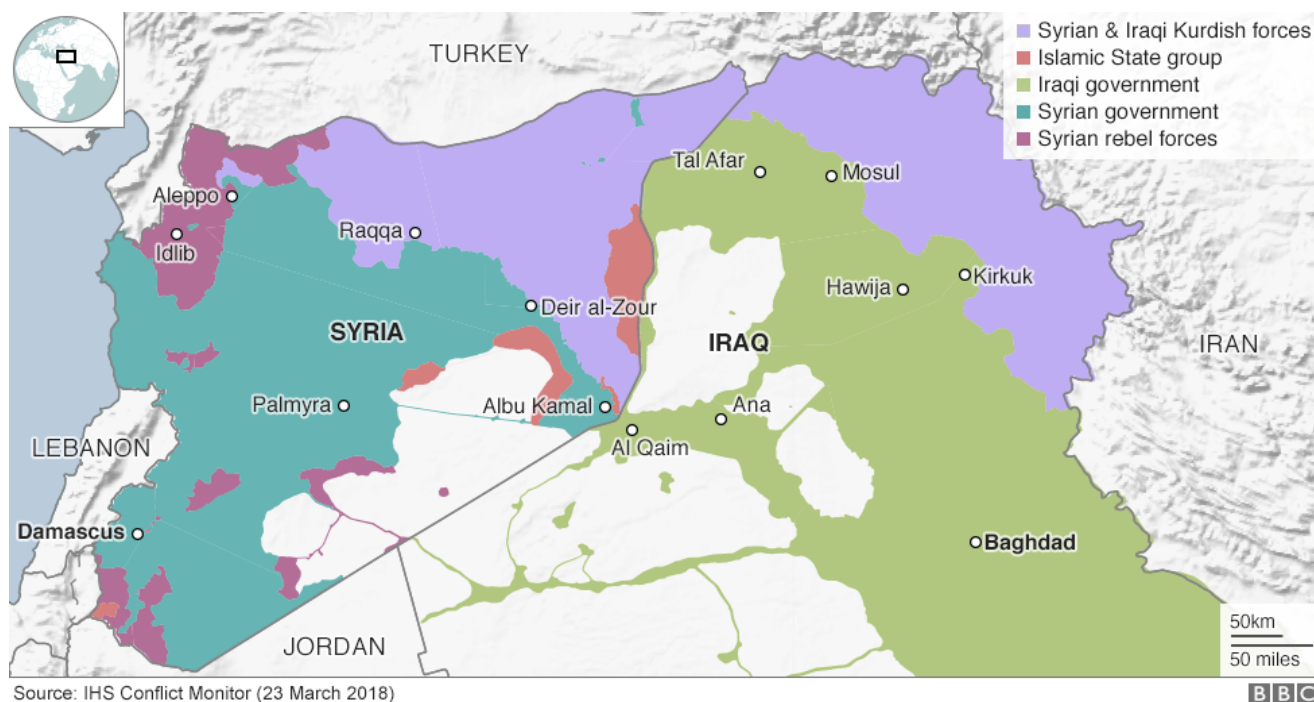
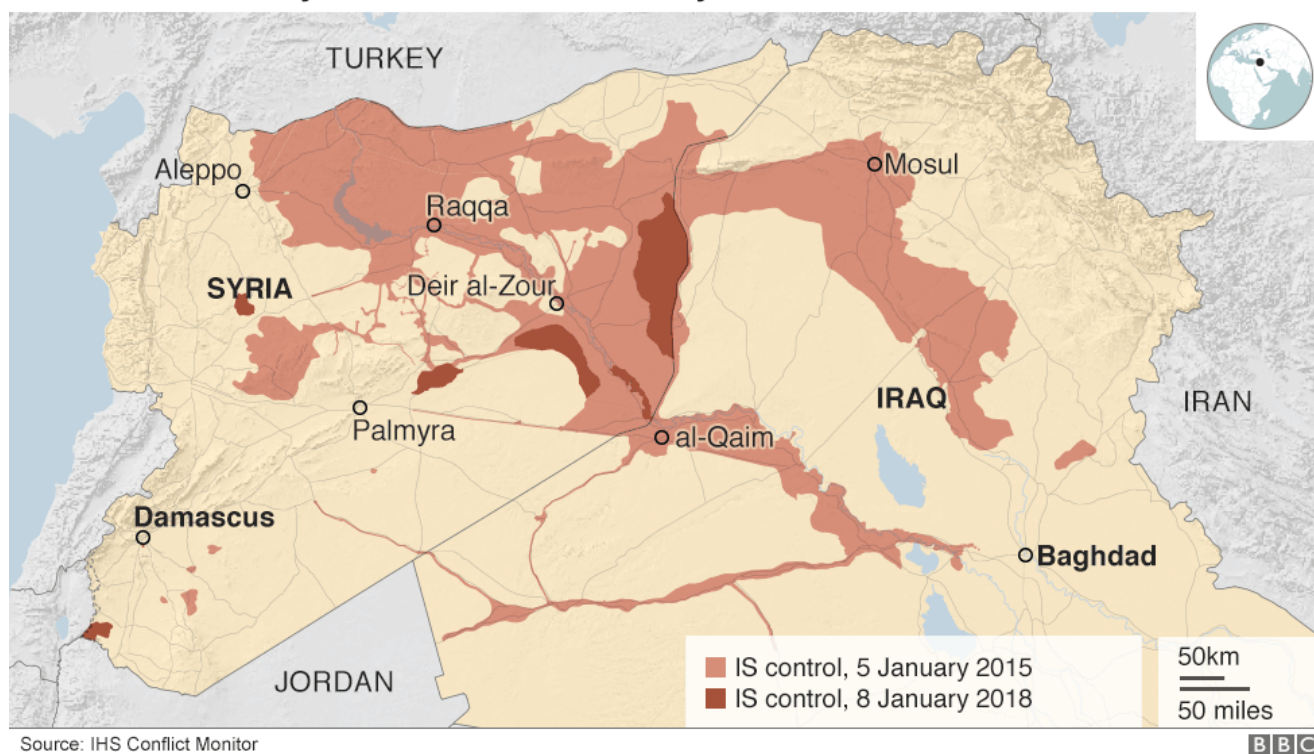


Source: CNN reporting | Updated January 22, 2018

<sup>43</sup> Richard Allen Greene, “The free-for-all in Syria will make your head spin,” *CNN*, Graphic by Anastasia Belyukova and Henrik Pettersson for *CNN*, 11 April 2018

Figure 3: IS Territory 2015 vs. 2018<sup>44</sup>

### How much territory IS has lost since January 2015

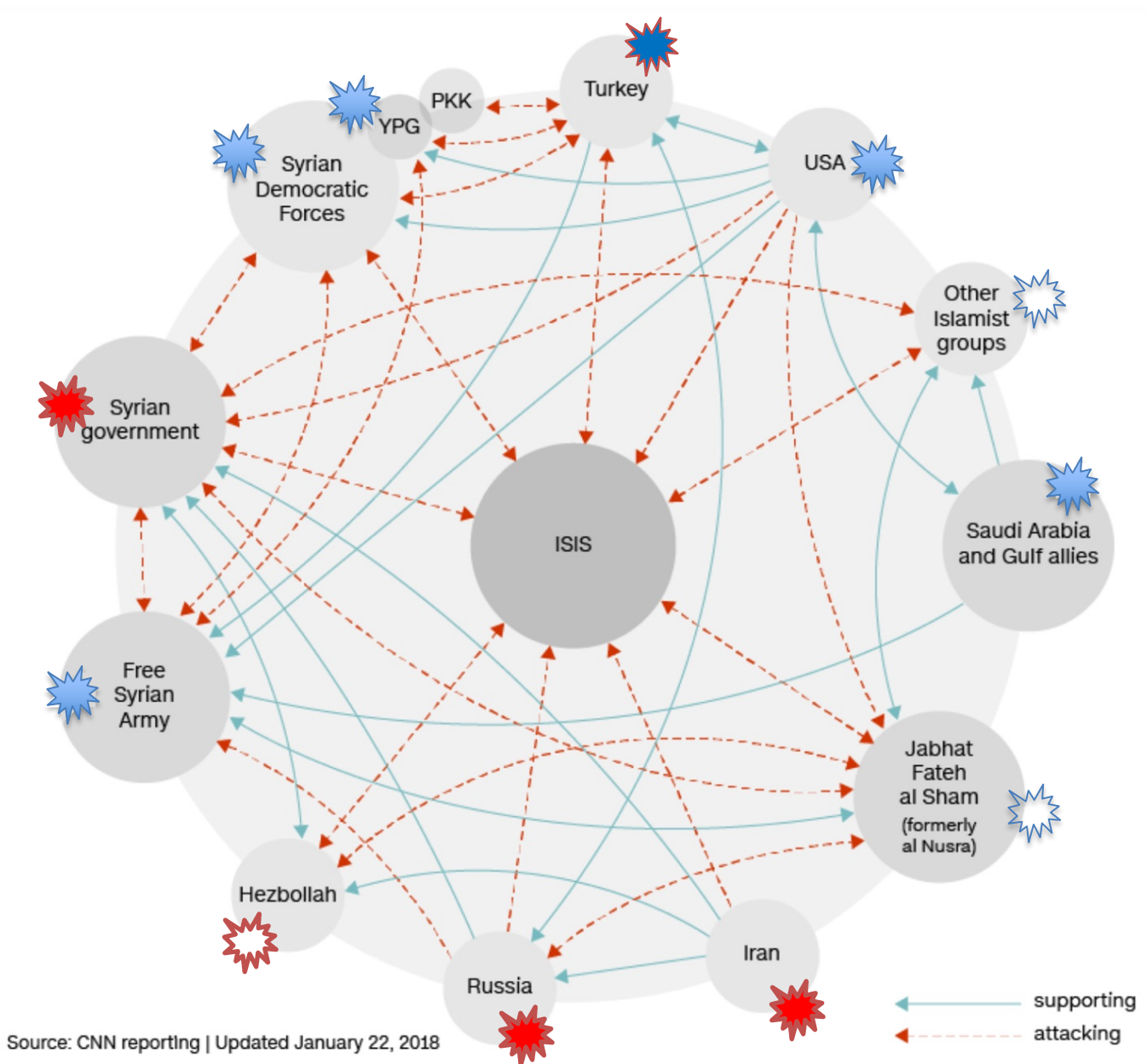


<sup>44</sup> BBC, "Islamic State and the crisis in Iraq and Syria in maps," 28 March 2018

As the Islamic State's presence diminishes in the country, the other forces have more opportunity to fight each other, or as in the case of the Kurds, be attacked by major state actors (Turkey). Over time, the American and Russian coalitions have supported or opposed all of the main players in the conflict, and they each continue to shape their foreign policy around the situation in Syria. There is significant confusion regarding actors on the ground, especially because many smaller groups change their names and public alliances for political reasons, which just continues to worsen an already complex problem. This confusion also makes it necessary to categorize the actors in Syria based on coalition alliances in order to follow and analyze them, as seen in Figure 4. Considering Washington and Moscow's roles in the war, this division and method of categorization makes sense for the Prisoner's Dilemma.



**Figure 4: Alliance and Opposition Networks in Syria Fighting the Islamic State (Annotated)**



US Ally	
US Associate	
Russia Ally	
Russia Associate	
US Ally-Russian Associate	



Something interesting about Figure 4 is that it denotes bilateral support between the US and Turkey but also Russia and Turkey. In this paper, Turkey is considered part of the US coalition because it is explicitly allied with the US, a contributing partner in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS,<sup>45</sup> and the American military has been using bases in Turkey for missions in Syria. Nonetheless, Turkey has been working closely with Iran and Russia in negotiating de-confliction zones and supporting Russia in its push towards peace negotiations. Also, both Turkey and Russia desire the removal of US forces from Syria, so they can each pursue their military objectives without fear of causing war with the US. Therefore, since there has been a more direct and intimate military and political relationship between the US and Turkey, it is a US ally within the US coalition. But it has been an important associate of Russia as well.

### **The Anti-IS Coalitions:**

As noted above in the CNN diagram, there are a large number of actors in Syria, most everyone fighting the Islamic State. However, the number makes it difficult for governments (and their intelligence services), media outlets, human rights organizations, and even actors on the ground to keep everyone straight. Especially because many organizations change names or affiliations in efforts to gain military and political support or to escape a particular title, like ‘terrorist organization.’ But more generally, the conflict can be simplified for purpose of analysis and divided into two major great-power coalitions, one led by the United States and the other by Russia. It is important to note that the reason there are two coalitions to begin with is because Russia chose not to join the US Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS because of differing objectives

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<sup>45</sup> *The Global Coalition*, “75 Partners,” 2018

in the civil war. Explicitly, “U.S. officials say Washington has made no specific request to Moscow to join the coalition or work together in the fight against Islamic State. Nor has Russia offered to do so, they said. But they acknowledge Moscow’s potential importance in any campaign in the Middle East.”<sup>46</sup> Because of this separation, Washington and Moscow entered the Prisoner’s Dilemma, fighting against a common enemy in a greater conflict where the two countries oppose each other.

In Syria, the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS formed September 10, 2014 and consists of 75 partners<sup>47</sup> (Figure 5) “and is unique in its membership, scope, and commitment. Together the Global Coalition is committed to degrading and ultimately defeating Daesh.”<sup>48</sup> However, the strength of the US coalition has predominantly come from the United States, NATO (primarily France, Turkey, and the United Kingdom), and Arab League (Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia). The Russian coalition consists predominantly of Russia, the Syrian government, Iran, and Iranian-backed, Lebanon-based Hezbollah.

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<sup>46</sup> Lesley Wroughton and Matt Spetalnick, “Russian suspicions of U.S. motives in Syria make cooperation unlikely,” *Reuters*, 28 September 2014

<sup>47</sup> Figure 4: US Department of State, “The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS: Partners;” The Global Coalition, [theglobalcoalition.org](http://theglobalcoalition.org)

<sup>48</sup> The Global Coalition, [theglobalcoalition.org/en/partners](http://theglobalcoalition.org/en/partners)

**Figure 5: The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS**

<p><b>AFRICA</b>  Cameroon  Chad  Djibouti  Egypt  Ethiopia  Libya  Morocco  Niger  Nigeria  Somalia  Tunisia</p> <p><b>AMERICAS</b>  Canada  Panama  United States</p> <p><b>ASIA PACIFIC</b>  Afghanistan  Australia  Japan  Malaysia  New Zealand  Philippines  Singapore  South Korea  Taiwan</p>	<p><b>EUROPE</b>  Albania  Austria  Belgium  Bosnia and Herzegovina  Bulgaria  Croatia  Cyprus  Czech Republic  Denmark  Estonia  Finland  France  Georgia  Germany  Greece  Hungary  Iceland  Ireland  Italy  Kosovo  Latvia  Lithuania  Luxembourg  Macedonia  Moldova  Montenegro  Netherlands  Norway  Poland  Portugal  Romania  Serbia  Slovakia  Slovenia  Spain  Sweden  Turkey  Ukraine  United Kingdom</p>	<p><b>INSTITUTIONS</b>  Arab League  EU  INTERPOL  NATO</p> <p><b>MIDDLE EAST</b>  Bahrain  Iraq  Jordan  Kuwait  Lebanon  Oman  Qatar  Saudi Arabia  United Arab Emirates</p>
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“[In 2014, the United States] announced the formation of a broad international coalition to defeat The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has focused primarily on fighting within Syria and Iraq but also dealt with the spread of radicalization and attacks internationally. The US Department of State website states: “The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has dramatically undermined stability in Iraq, Syria and the broader Middle East and poses a threat to international peace and security. ISIS continues to commit gross, systematic abuses of human rights and violations of international law, including indiscriminate killing and deliberate targeting of civilians, mass executions and extrajudicial killings, persecution of individuals and entire communities on the basis of their identity, kidnapping of civilians, forced displacement of Shia communities and minority groups, killing and maiming of children, rape and other forms of sexual violence, along with numerous other atrocities. ISIS presents a global terrorist threat which has recruited thousands of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria from across the globe and leveraged technology to spread its violent extremist ideology and to incite terrorist acts. As noted in UN Security Council Resolution 2170, ‘terrorism can only be defeated by a sustained and comprehensive approach involving the active participation and collaboration of all States...’ which is why our first priority is to encourage others to join in this important endeavor.”<sup>49</sup>

The initial five tenets of the coalition, as determined in the 2014 NATO meeting that created the coalition include: 1) military support; 2) inhibiting the spread of foreign fighters; 3) cutting off sources of revenue and funding; 4) dealing with humanitarian crises; and 5) “exposing true nature,”<sup>50</sup> which I interpreted to mean countering violent extremism by showing the weakness and vulnerability of IS and the fallibility of its cause. There are 75 partners within the Global Coalition contributing to efforts against IS. This declaration of a global coalition paralleled the American-led intervention in Iraq to fight IS, which officially began under President Barrack Obama in 2014. According to the Department of Defense (DoD) the operation is called the Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve (JTFOIR), designed with the explicit purpose to defeat ISIS. In Iraq the JTFOIR shares advise and assist duties with the Combined Joint Task Force Land Component Command (CJTFLCC).

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<sup>49</sup> UNSC Resolution 2170, 15 August 2014

<sup>50</sup> Office of the Spokesperson, “Joint Statement of Guiding Principles From the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS,” 13 February 2018

According to the Pentagon, JTFOIR is also “the primary advise-assist-and-accompany force in Syria...working closely with the SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces]. [The JTFOIR] is the driving force of working by, with, and through [US] partner forces on the ground in Syria.”<sup>51</sup> The SDF utilized a “multi-ethnic, multi-religious”<sup>52</sup> coalition of US-backed Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Yazidis, Armenians, and Turkmen in its campaign to liberate Raqqa, which lasted from June to October 2017. The SDF and American allies were successful in this campaign and have conducted the most attacks against the organization, as shown in Figure 6<sup>53</sup>. However, there is not just one coalition in Syria fighting the Islamic State. The Russian coalition is also supposed to be fighting the Islamic State, though little to no public records show Russian involvement in the fight against IS.

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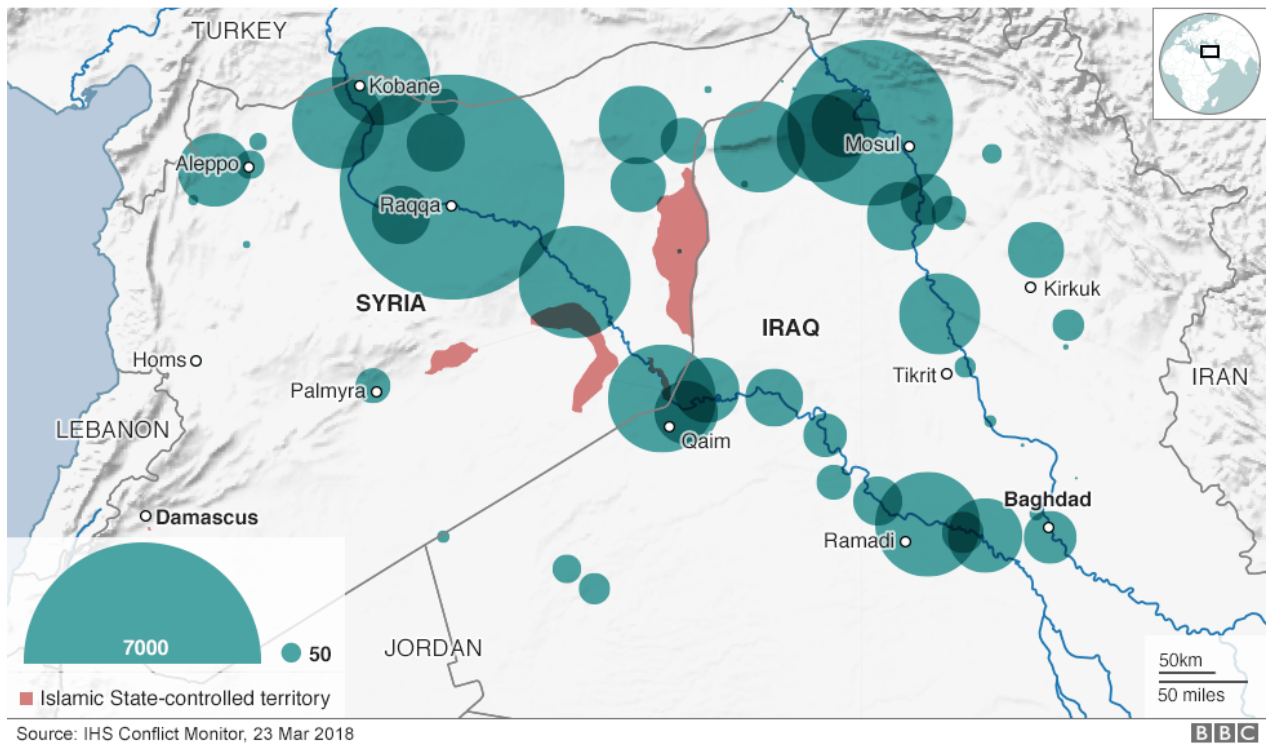
<sup>51</sup> US Department of State, “Briefing on the Global Coalition To Counter ISIS,” 13 July 2017

<sup>52</sup> US Department of State, “Briefing on the Global Coalition To Counter ISIS,” 13 July 2017

<sup>53</sup> *BBC*, “Islamic State and the crisis in Iraq and Syria in maps,” 28 March 2018

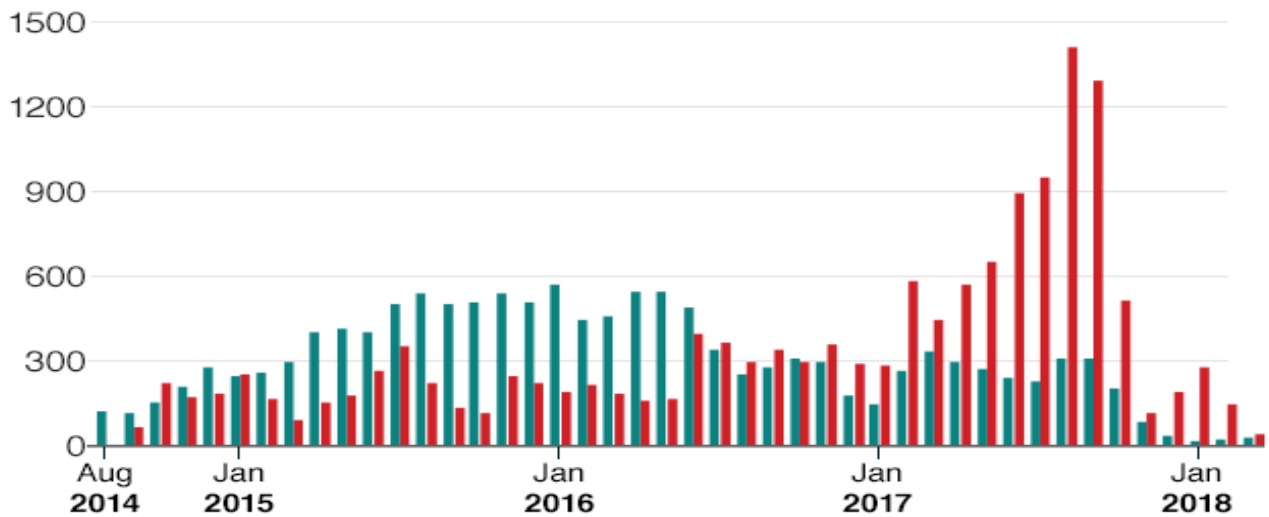
**Figure 6: The US-Led Coalition Against IS**

US-led coalition strikes: **IRAQ: 13,315** **SYRIA: 14,660**



## Coalition strikes

**Iraq 13,315** **Syria 14,660**



\*Figures are up to 26 March 2018

Source: US Central Command

## Why Two Coalitions?

When the US formed the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, Russia did not take initiative to join, and Washington did not press the issue. “Russia has no desire, no plan and no interest to be part of any campaign led by the United States,” said Lukyanov, who is also head of a Kremlin foreign-policy advisory panel.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, Russia has also contributed to the fight against IS, although there have been many accusations against Russia that its army has attacked Western-backed rebels instead of the terrorist organization. In 2014, “Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of the journal *Russia in Global Affairs*, said Russia’s role in the fight against Islamic State likely would be limited to assisting the Iraqi and Syrian governments. Moscow already supplied weapons to security forces in both countries.”<sup>55</sup> Overall, we have seen this to be true, but “In September 2015, Russia launched a bombing campaign against what it referred to as “terrorist groups” in Syria, which included ISIL as well as anti-Assad rebel groups backed by the USA. Russia has also deployed military advisers to shore up Assad's defenses.”<sup>56</sup> However, Russia has predominantly avoided conflict with the American coalition. Even if the United States and its coalition carries the brunt of the anti-IS burden, it is crucial that Russia has kept from antagonizing the US.

Although the two major coalitions in Syria are composed of many different actors, including states and international organizations, the PD analysis simplifies the situation because it considers the two individual coalitions as units. For the most part, the American coalition

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<sup>54</sup> Lesley Wroughton and Matt Spetalnick, “Russian suspicions of U.S. motives in Syria make cooperation unlikely,” *Reuters*, 28 September 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Lesley Wroughton and Matt Spetalnick, “Russian suspicions of U.S. motives in Syria make cooperation unlikely,” *Reuters*, 28 September 2014.

<sup>56</sup> *Al Jazeera*, “Syria's civil war explained from the beginning,” 14 April 2018

components work together<sup>57</sup> and the Russian coalition components work together towards the same respective goals. Moreover, the primary reason the threat of war is such a powerful deterrent is because it would be between two great power rivals, the US and Russia. Therefore, because they are central to the punishment strategies as enforcers and central to deterrence as possible combatants, they are the primary actors for analysis. They are the great power leaders of their respective coalitions with influence in the United Nations and military strength throughout the world.

### **Beliefs about Punishment**

The US and Russia have managed to solve their Prisoner's Dilemma problem because of their reputations and credible deterrence. A player's reputation is created based on the beliefs of others about the strategy that player will use. A player's strategy for a game is a complete plan to play the game. The interaction of players' strategies determines the outcomes.<sup>58</sup> Deterrence is achieved through the establishment of a reputation of reciprocity/retaliation and credible threats because "the key to doing well is not overcoming others but eliciting their cooperation."<sup>59</sup> Below are definitions of key terms and then explanations of the concepts:

#### Deterrence:

1. "The action of discouraging an action or event through instilling doubt or fear of the consequences."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Turkey's invasion of Syria against the Kurds occurred in January 2018, which is outside the main period of the IPD analysis. Prior to this invasion, the Turks and the Kurds primarily focused on the fight against the Islamic State instead of each other, promoting the American goals simultaneously if not together.

<sup>58</sup> James D. Morrow, *Game Theory for Political Scientists*, 1994

<sup>59</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 1984, pg. 189

<sup>60</sup> *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/deterrence>



2. “Military strategy under which one power uses the threat of reprisal effectively to preclude an attack from an adversary power. With the advent of nuclear weapons, the term deterrence largely has been applied to the basic strategy of the nuclear powers and of the major alliance systems. The premise of the strategy is that each nuclear power maintains a high level of instant and overwhelming destructive capability against any aggression—i.e., the ability, visible and credible to a would-be attacker, to inflict unacceptable damage.”<sup>61</sup>

#### Reciprocity and Retaliation:

1. Cooperating when cooperated with and defecting once defected upon.
2. Retaliation and reciprocal actions must be a response to another player’s decision and must be a relatively proportional response.<sup>62</sup> Otherwise, we start breaching the territory of revenge.
3. “Many forms of retaliation are socially productive in that they can improve bargaining and make compromise possible.”<sup>63</sup>

#### Negative Reciprocity versus Revenge:

1. “Negative Reciprocity Norm” in international relations<sup>64</sup> “involves a unitary set of beliefs [that favors] retaliation as the correct and proper way to respond to unfavorable treatment.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Deterrence: Political and Military Strategy,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

<sup>62</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*

<sup>63</sup> Rose McDermott, Anthony Lopez, Peter K. Hatemi, “The Psychology of Revenge and Deterrence,” *World Order, Power & Strategy*, 2018, pg. 78

<sup>64</sup> Rose McDermott, Anthony Lopez, Peter K. Hatemi, “The Psychology of Revenge and Deterrence,” *World Order, Power & Strategy*, 2018, pg. 77

<sup>65</sup> Paul Eder et al., “Punishing Those Responsible for the Prison Abuses at Abu Ghraib: The Influence of the Negative Reciprocity Norm (NRN), *Political Psychology* 27, no. 6, 2006, pg. 810

2. “Negative reciprocity is usually proportional to the initial harm, triggered by anger, and is aimed at recalibrating enemy preferences.... [It] must be measured and relatively proportional if cooperation is to be maintained or reestablished.”<sup>66</sup>  
[Although not all American and Russian decisions are influenced by anger, sometimes they are rational responses to provocation, but the two other conditions indisputably apply to my case study.]
3. “Revenge is disproportional to the initial harm, often triggered by hatred, and functions to inflict harm on the enemy for the sheer pleasure of extracting vengeance.”<sup>67</sup> [This is not what we are talking about with the US and Russia in Syria.]

#### Punishment:

1. “Evolved as a strategy to make others pay for harms they inflicted... [and is designed] to deter future exploitation.... It can also help salvage the possibility for future cooperation [and forgiveness] if the aggressor comes into line.”<sup>68</sup>

#### Tit-for-Tat Strategy:

1. “The most basic form of retaliation is tit-for-tat punishment, in which a harm received is responded to with a harm of relatively equivalent magnitude.”<sup>69</sup>

#### Credible Threat:

1. A threat that is serious, believable, and possible to be executed.

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<sup>66</sup> Rose McDermott, Anthony Lopez, Peter K. Hatemi, “The Psychology of Revenge and Deterrence,” *World Order, Power & Strategy*, 2018, pg. 77-78

<sup>67</sup> Rose McDermott, Anthony Lopez, Peter K. Hatemi, “The Psychology of Revenge and Deterrence,” *World Order, Power & Strategy*, 2018, pg. 77

<sup>68</sup> Rose McDermott, Anthony Lopez, Peter K. Hatemi, “The Psychology of Revenge and Deterrence,” *World Order, Power & Strategy*, 2018, pg. 77-78

<sup>69</sup> Rose McDermott, Anthony Lopez, Peter K. Hatemi, “The Psychology of Revenge and Deterrence,” *World Order, Power & Strategy*, 2018, pg. 77

## Deterrence

“Deterrence is successful when the threat of unacceptable costs prevents an adversary from taking some undesired course of action.”<sup>70</sup> Importantly, deterrence is learned over time. It is unlikely for one instance of reciprocity or retaliation to deter an adversary; rather, deterrence is a credible threat of a consistent behavior pattern, such as air strikes in Syria. Deterrence is a controversial subject within and outside the political science community because it is nearly impossible to prove or measure. After all, if deterrence is working, it means nothing is happening. Well, it means something isn’t happening anyway. But how is ‘nothing’ measureable? There is no formal mechanism for measuring deterrence. Instead, there are some important assumptions that go into understanding and recognizing the existence of deterrence in international relations:

1. The opposing actors (states, in this case) are rational and self-interested.
2. In a case where two actors are interacting, at least one actor must be individually incentivized to behave in a way the other does not like. Simply, Actor A wants to do something that Actor B does not want it to do.
  - a. Ex. Russia is incentivized to attack Western-backed insurgents in Syria because it supports the Syrian regime. The US does not want Russia to conduct these types of attacks.
3. Both actors know, at least to an extent, the desires and preferences of the other.

Typically, an actor knows what the other actor does and does not want it to do. Actor A knows Actor B does not want it to act in a particular way.

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<sup>70</sup> Rose McDermott, Anthony Lopez, Peter K. Hatemi, “The Psychology of Revenge and Deterrence,” *World Order, Power & Strategy*, 2018, pg. 70

- a. Ex. Russia knows the United States does not want it to attack Western-backed rebels in Syria. Rather, it wants Russia to attack the Islamic State.
4. There is a credible threat of punishment that keeps an actor from acting in its self-interest to the detriment or disapproval of the other. Actor A does not act in the way Actor B disapproves of because it believes Actor B's threat of punishment is credible. The credibility of Actor B's threat is determined by the belief system of Actor A. Does Actor A believe Actor B will act on its threat? If yes, Actor B's threat is credible.
  - a. Ex. Russia does not attack Western-backed rebels because it fears the United States's reciprocity and deems the US's threats of reciprocity and punishment mechanisms as credible.
5. Therefore, deterrence is immeasurable because it inherently means something did not happen. Actor A did not act in the way Actor B objected to.
  - a. Ex. It is unknown how many times Russia has considered attacking Western-backed forces in Syria and decided not to do so because of the threat of American retaliation. It is only known when Russia has attacked rebels and when it has not.

The whole point of deterrence is that something does not happen. However, even though a lack of something, or 'nothing,' is not entirely measurable, we can still recognize instances of deterrence. The success of deterrence in this research context is the ability of the US and Russia to avoid war over Syria. Therefore, the lack of an American-Russian war is the indicator of deterrence. It is the credible threat that keeps the two sides cooperating, at least against the

Islamic State. Deterrence is the mechanism that prevents Russia or the United States from defecting and exploiting the other during its cooperation against IS. Without the threat of war, it is likely that both sides would try harder to exploit each other in pursuit of their individual interests in the Syrian war.

## **Reciprocity**

“States may act in international crises not for the intrinsic value of the immediate issue, but rather to deter future challenges to their interests by building a reputation for responding to such challenges.”<sup>71</sup> Reciprocity is a key element of building a reputation of responsiveness to defections. However, the degree of retaliation is key to the development of deterrence and a reputable threat of negative reciprocity: “The injury and response must be balanced. An over-retaliatory response provokes escalation while an under-retaliatory response provokes exploitation.”<sup>72</sup> Despite rhetoric of escalation from both Washington and Moscow over the years because of defections and reciprocated defections, neither side has wanted to actually escalate the tension between the two countries to the point of direct conflict. Therefore, over-retaliatory responses to defections have not been prevalent in Syria. However, there have been cases of under-retaliatory measures, especially from the United States, that have hurt the US's reputation and possibly prompted further defections from the Russian and the Syrian regimes in Syria.

“Once the word gets out that reciprocity works, it becomes the thing to do. If you expect others to reciprocate your defections as well as your cooperations, you will be wise to avoid

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<sup>71</sup> James D. Morrow, *Game Theory for Political Scientists*, 1994, pg. 241

<sup>72</sup> Sandra L. Bloom, “Commentary: Reflections on the Desire for Revenge,” *Journal of Emotional Abuse* 2, no. 4, 2001

starting any trouble.”<sup>73</sup> Which is great, if there is actually reciprocity. But the opposite is also true; if one sides chooses not to reciprocate, it opens it up to exploitation, and the other side may be inclined to start trouble. Overall, Syria is an example where the situation has not escalated to the brink of war between the US and Russia, which means that the threat of war and reciprocity is still credible. However, this does not mean that reciprocity has been utilized effectively throughout the whole war. Reciprocity is actually a distinguishing factor between Obama and Trump's Syrian policy. Obama was more hesitant to retaliate to Russian and Syrian defections than Trump has been.

A significant example of under-retaliation in Syria came from the side of the US under the caution of the Obama administration. It is one of the most widely noted instances of American rhetoric regarding Syria—Obama's "red line" against the use of chemical weapons in 2012.<sup>74</sup> Assad used chemical weapons in Khan al-Assal on March 19, 2013<sup>75</sup> and in Damascus on August 21, 2013,<sup>76</sup> and the United States (both Congress and POTUS) did little about it. This dismissal of Syria and Russia crossing the "red line" dramatically hurt the United States's credibility when threatening military action and policy enforcement. The US did take diplomatic action in response to the attacks, working with the UNSC (including Russia) to mandate the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons, but by not enforcing the red line, it weakened its international reputation according to allies and adversaries. Thus, the Obama administration never utilized successful negative reciprocity against the Assad regime, even though it achieved

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<sup>73</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, 1984, pg. 189

<sup>74</sup> James Ball, “Obama issues Syria a 'red line' warning on chemical weapons,” *The Washington Post*, 20 August 2012

<sup>75</sup> *The Associated Press*, “Timeline of chemical weapons attacks in Syria,” *Fox News*, 10 April 2018

<sup>76</sup> *The Associated Press*, “Timeline of chemical weapons attacks in Syria,” *Fox News*, 10 April 2018

cooperation from Russia in the UNSC regarding the destruction of Assad's chemical weapons stockpile.

Since his election in 2016, Trump's administration has been more focused on implementation of reciprocity. In fact, France and the UK have also been more willing to utilize negative reciprocity in Syria. For example, Obama's failure to enforce his 'red line' likely influenced French President Emmanuel Macron's enforcement of his own chemical 'red line'<sup>77</sup> in the latest air strikes conducted by the US, UK, and France against the Syrian government on April 14, 2018.<sup>78</sup> In February 2017, Russia and China vetoed a UNSC resolution to sanction Syria for its use of chemical weapons. Then, on April 4 of the same year, the Syrian army carried out its largest chemical weapons attack since 2013 on the city of "Khan Sheikhoun in the rebel-held Idlib province."<sup>79</sup> President Trump actually blamed President Obama's unwillingness to utilize negative reciprocity against the Assad regime for this attack, stating "the 'heinous' actions of Assad's government are the direct result of Obama administration's 'weakness and irresolution.'" This bold statement may or may not have truth to it, but it obviously shows that reciprocity is a priority of Trump, and it highlights the importance of reputation in international politics.

In response to the 2017 chemical weapons incident, the US conducted its first direct military attack against the Syrian government, attacking the air base from which the chemical weapons were deployed-- Al-Shayrat airfield. "The Pentagon announced that 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles had been fired at [the base]. The missiles were aimed at Syrian fighter jets,

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<sup>77</sup> Rick Noack, "Like Obama, Macron said chemical weapons were his 'red line' in Syria. So now what?," *The Washington Post*, 9 April 2018

<sup>78</sup> Zachary Cohen and Kevin Liptak, "US, UK and France launch Syria strikes targeting Assad's chemical weapons," 14 April 2018

<sup>79</sup> *The Associated Press*, "Timeline of chemical weapons attacks in Syria," *Fox News*, 10 April 2018

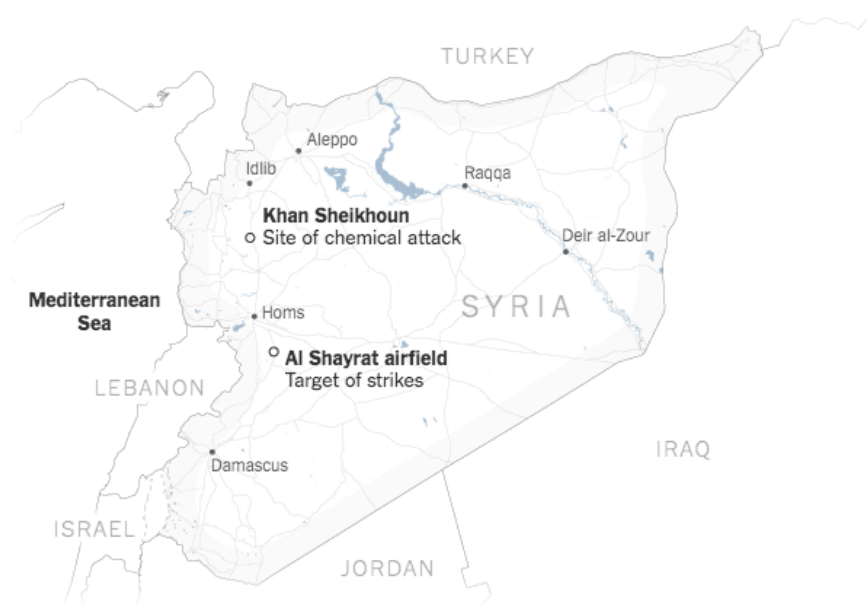
hardened aircraft shelters, radar equipment, ammunition bunkers, sites for storing fuel and air defense systems."<sup>80</sup> This attack is an important instance that highlights American reciprocity; American proactive, preemptive de-escalation measures and the Russian response to the airstrikes, as well as how they both fit into the game theory model will be discussed later.

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<sup>80</sup> Michael R Gordon et. al., "Dozens of U.S. Missiles Hit Air Base in Syria." *The New York Times*, 6 April 2017



**Figure 7: April 7, 2017 Airstrike on Al-Shayrat Airfield<sup>81</sup>**



<sup>81</sup> *The New York Times*, "Mapping the Targets of the American Military Attack on Syria," 7 April 2017

Then, Nikki Haley told the UN on March 12, 2018 that "if the U.N. Security Council fails to act on Syria, Washington 'remains prepared to act if we must,' just as it did last year when it bombed Al-Shayrat Airfield over a deadly chemical weapons attack."<sup>82</sup> This rhetoric was designed to deter future attacks and elicit cooperation from Syria, as well as to promote the US's reputation as a 'tough guy' willing to incur the costs of reciprocity to promote its interests. Most recently, the Syrian government conducted another chemical weapon attack on Douma on April 7, 2018, testing this American rhetoric. The United States, as well as France, threatened a military attack in response to the chemical weapons incident.<sup>83</sup> On April 12, 2018, "two US Navy destroyers armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles were in position and ready to be called into action, among other assets including jets and submarines should President Donald Trump make good on his threat to order a military strike on targets in Syria."<sup>84</sup> On April 14, 2018, the US, France, and the UK conducted a joint operation against Syrian chemical weapons targets.<sup>85</sup>

In all fairness to both administrations, the US cannot fully prevent chemical weapons attacks in Syria without putting troops on the ground and taking control of territory to destroy the weapons and air force entirely. However, it can deter their use. Additionally, in both cases, the Syrian government conducted another attack the next year, so deterrence is still inconclusive and may be determined by after the most recent US strike in Syria. As aforementioned, deterrence is learned from a pattern of reciprocity, not just an instance. Nonetheless, Obama's "red line" and lack of enforcement versus Trump's active retaliation represents the significance of reciprocity in reputation building and deterring other actors.

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<sup>82</sup> Reuters Staff, "U.S. warns if Security Council doesn't act on Syria, it will," *Reuters*, 12 March 2018

<sup>83</sup> *BBC*, Syria 'chemical attack': France's President Macron 'has proof,' 12 April 2018

<sup>84</sup> Zachary Cohen, "US destroyers, subs, jets could answer Trump's Syria strike call," *CNN*, 12 April 2018

<sup>85</sup> Nancy Youseff and Michael Bender, "U.S., U.K. and France Launch Strikes Against Syria," 14 April 2018

### **III. Tracking US-Russian Cooperation, Defection, and Reciprocity**

Now the IPD model discussed throughout this paper is applied to US-Russian interaction throughout the Syrian civil war, focusing on the time period between 2014 (when the American counter-IS coalition was officially formed) and the end of 2017 (when the US Department of State and other media sources reported about 98% of IS-controlled land had been taken back<sup>86</sup>). Although the IPD between Russia and the United States has continued into 2018, the situation is constantly changing and with the suppression of IS, the game has already changed substantially. In this chapter, the Prisoner's Dilemma and theory of deterrence is related to major incidents reported on by the media, including Russian defections, American defections, and/or US-Russia cooperation.

Since the international media focuses extensively on the war in Syria, there are many articles in existence about the US-Russian relationship and the conflict. Instead of citing them all (which would be nearly impossible), I have selected some of the more important stories to highlight how cooperation has developed between the two states. These articles clearly show that the cooperative relationship is self-enforcing, meaning (1) there is no central authority enforcing it, and (2) neither side is inclined to deviate substantially from the status quo. The situation remains a Prisoner's Dilemma because each side is incentivized to utilize the fight against IS for its own self-interest but chooses not to because of credible threats of punishment for defections.

Although the primary IPD analysis concerns the situation in Syria from 2014-2017 because of the involvement of Russia and the US in these years, it is important to look at the

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<sup>86</sup> Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition To Counter ISIS, Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition To Counter ISIS Brett McGurk, "Update on the D-ISIS Campaign," 21 December 2017

context leading up to American and Russian intervention and the current complexities that exist in the country now that the Islamic State is relatively incapacitated. Since there is a lot of context addressed in the first two chapters, this chapter just highlights a few major aspects of reputation building, defection, negative reciprocity (or lack thereof) in the two years prior to the establishment of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. One of the most notable criticisms of the Obama administration's policy in Syria was his declaration of a chemical weapons 'red line:' "We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus."<sup>87</sup> However, it was not the red line itself that jeopardized Obama's foreign policy, but rather the fact that he did not enforce that red line on August 21, 2013 when the Assad regime attacked Damascus with the nerve agent sarin.

In response to the attack, Obama asked Congress to approve air strikes against the Assad regime, but the proposal lacked support, and the US only rhetorically condemned the use of chemical weapons in the conflict. This affected the United States' reputation because it implied that future US military threats may not be credible, which inhibited America's ability to enhance deterrence against the Russia coalition, including the Assad regime. However, the international response marked an important point in the US-Russia relationship because in September 2013, the two powers reached a deal regarding the chemical weapons in Syria. Following the 2013 incident, multilateral negotiations among the UN, US, Russia, and Syria were conducted to prevent future chemical attacks.<sup>88</sup> The UN Security Council (UNSC), with compliance from Russia, passed a resolution that mandated Syria to dispose of its chemical arsenal.<sup>89</sup> This was one

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<sup>87</sup> Madeline Conway, "Timeline: U.S. approach to the Syrian civil war," *Politico*, 7 April 2017

<sup>88</sup> *The New York Times*, "Declassified U.S. Report on Chemical Weapons Attack," 11 April 2017

<sup>89</sup> CNN Library, "Syrian Civil War Fast Facts," *CNN*, 14 April 2018

of the first instances the international community saw mutual cooperation between the two sides in response to a major defection.

It is possible that the Russians realized that if the Assad regime continued its use of chemical weapons and direct ties were found with Russia that the United States would eventually respond with military action, and the Russians would lose credibility in the international community if they were proven to contribute to the chemical attacks (in which case, there was an aspect of deterrence despite the lack of an American military response). The cooperation also could have been an effort by Russia to keep the US out of the conflict. Whatever the motivation, the two sides agreed that by mid-2014, all of Assad's chemical weapons had to be removed from the country and destroyed. By June 2014, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons reported that the last of Syria's declared/known chemical weapons had been removed, but there could still be more.<sup>90</sup> Since Assad has used chemical weapons again, either the entire arsenal was not declared and thus not destroyed, or the Syrian regime created more weapons. But this cooperation was still a significant point of defection by Russia-supported Assad and the preference of the two coalitions to negotiate and mutual cooperate instead of defect and escalate is notable.

In 2013, the CIA began its covert operation "Timber Sycamore" in Syria, arming and training the SDF and other rebel forces to oppose the Assad regime and the Islamic State.

"This support entailed ammunition and small arms, including rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and valuable anti-tank guided missiles. Critically, it also entailed money for salaries, without which commanders could not recruit or retain fighters who would desert or defect to better-resourced extremist groups."<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Madeline Conway, "Timeline: U.S. approach to the Syrian civil war," *Politico*, 7 April 2017

<sup>91</sup> Faysal Itani, "The End of American Support for Syrian Rebels Was Inevitable," *The Atlantic*, 21 July 2017

Then in September 2014, Congress approved a plan to arm and train Syrian rebels, and Obama began authorizing airstrikes against the Islamic State.

Looking back at 2014, most international news sources discussed the near impossibility of cooperation between Washington and Moscow in Syria. *The Washington Post* claimed that “with mutual trust all but gone the United States and Russia enter a new year full of challenges that will test whether the world’s nuclear giants can salvage their relationship.”<sup>92</sup> *Reuters* published an article titled, “Russian suspicions of U.S. motives in Syria make cooperation unlikely,” and it stated: “The United States and Russia see Islamic State as a common enemy but are failing to overcome deep mutual distrust and agree on how to tackle the threat together, making any role for Moscow in the U.S.-led campaign unlikely, say U.S. officials.” The article cited “stark differences” between the “former Cold War foes” and stated that the US and Russia’s opposing interests in the outcome of the war “all but ruled out military collaboration in Syria against [the] Islamic State.”<sup>93</sup> Additionally, James Goldgeier, a Kremlinologist at American University in Washington, “said the obstacles to U.S.-Russia cooperation against Islamic State appear too formidable to overcome soon.”<sup>94</sup>

The media agencies seem fairly dramatic considering the US and Russia have actually been cooperating in Syria since at the latest 2013 and have recently even worked together to promote ceasefires and prevent military clashes and escalations.<sup>95</sup> How has cooperation been achieved by the two sides in the midst of grave skepticism from the international community and

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<sup>92</sup> Will Englund, “U.S. relations with Russia face critical tests in 2014 as Putin, Obama fail to fulfill expectations,” *The Washington Post*, 2 January 2014

<sup>93</sup> Lesley Wroughton and Matt Spetalnick, “Russian suspicions of U.S. motives in Syria make cooperation unlikely,” *Reuters*, 28 September 2014

<sup>94</sup> Lesley Wroughton and Matt Spetalnick, “Russian suspicions of U.S. motives in Syria make cooperation unlikely,” *Reuters*, 28 September 2014

<sup>95</sup> UN News, “UN Security Council agrees 30-day ceasefire in Syria,” 24 February 2018

assertions of worsening relations between Washington and Moscow? As discussed thoroughly in this project, the threat of direct, conventional warfare between the two countries has made continuous defection too costly and risky. So, they have cooperated instead. Although the news in 2014 may have correctly identified US-Russian struggles moving ahead and identified limits of collaboration between Moscow and Washington, the way in which the two have cooperated is as simple as not mutually defecting.

For instance, the two countries cooperated in December 2015 when they agreed on U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254, which ultimately led to the Geneva negotiations.<sup>96</sup>

“In October and November of [2015], the International Syria Support Group, consisting of 20 states and international organizations—controversially including Iran—set out a blueprint for moving Syrian peace forward in the Vienna Statement. This was endorsed with U.N. Security Council resolution 2254. In keeping with the formulation of the 2012 Geneva talks, resolution 2254 called for a January start to negotiations between the opposition and government, and elections within six months for a unity government.”<sup>97</sup>

Although these negotiations were halted and a ceasefire was not reached, this resolution marks another instance of US-Russia cooperation. Frequently Russia (often alongside China) vetoes UNSC resolutions regarding Syria, utilizing its power to unilaterally kill a resolution as a member of the Permanent Five (P5). Moscow has vetoed UNSC resolutions on Syria eight times: 4 October 2011, 4 February 2012, 19 July 2012, 22 May 2014, 8 October 2016, 5 December 2016, 28 February 2017, and 12 April 2017.<sup>98</sup> These vetoes are examples of Russian defections against the United States while the US cooperates. In these cases, Moscow chose to defeat a

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<sup>96</sup> United Nations, “Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2254 (2015), Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria, Setting Timetable for Talks,” 18 December 2015

<sup>97</sup> Katy Collin, “7 years into the Syrian war, is there a way out?,” *Brookings*, 16 March 2018

<sup>98</sup> Euan McKirdy, “8 times Russia blocked a UN Security Council resolution on Syria,” *CNN*, 21 July 2017

UNSC resolution on Syria to protect the Assad regime and its interests in Syria, often at the expense of the United States. In these cases, there has not been much negative reciprocity, probably because UNSC resolutions lack enforcement mechanisms and a veto is not a significant tangible defection. From a game theory perspective, when Russia vetoes UNSC resolutions, the US forgives instead of utilizing a tit-for-tat strategy. Of course, there is rhetoric used against Russia and the US remembers these defections, but Washington also realizes that defection on the next ‘play’ could lead to worse outcomes in Syria. Moreover, despite these eight Russian defections, over 20 UNSC resolutions have been passed regarding Syria, many with unanimous votes (no abstentions).<sup>99</sup> Therefore, Russia has cooperated in certain instances at the (at least rhetorical) expense of the Syrian government. Moscow knows that if it does not ever cooperate, the United States will also cease its pattern of cooperation. In this case, both sides would conduct iterated mutual defections, which could result in a war that neither side wants to fight.

In 2016, there was continued global rhetoric about detrimental relations between Washington and Moscow. For instance, a *Forbes* author claimed that tensions between the US and Russia in Syria were at an all-time high.<sup>100</sup> However, in the same year, the *Washington Post* published an article on the distinct possibility of cooperation between the two countries. The latter article argued that Washington and Moscow have several common goals in Syria, including the defeat of the Islamic State and other extremist groups, as well as the preservation of Syria as a single state. In order to overcome their significant differences—like their different preferences regarding the continuation of the Assad regime and the distinction of rebel factions from terrorist groups—the two powers have made compromises. For example, the US and EU have mentioned

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<sup>99</sup> Euan McKirdy, “8 times Russia blocked a UN Security Council resolution on Syria,” *CNN*, 21 July 2017

<sup>100</sup> Paul Coyer, “The Crisis Of Russian-American Relations And America's Failed Russia Policy,” *Forbes*, 15 October 2016



that they are willing to allow Assad initially remain in power and negotiate a regime change, and Russia “has also indicated that it is not bound to support the Assad family forever.”<sup>101</sup> However, the Russians say they believe a new power structure can be discussed only after the territory of Syria is secured and the Syrian state survives.”<sup>102</sup> Additionally, both countries have supported and continue to support political solutions with all major factions present at the bargaining table, even though they support opposing actors. It is important to cut through the noise and drama of mainstream media and look at how the US and Russia actually interact.

Overall, there are high tensions between the US and Russia regarding Syria, and many other issues as well. However, the relations between the two in Syria are a representation of cooperation to avoid war. In further support of this claim, there are several more defections and reactions to highlight from 2016 and subsequently 2017. A significant example of Russian defection in the IPD occurred on June 5, 2016, when “nearly 40 airstrikes by Russian and Syrian government warplanes hit rebel-held areas in and around Syria's Aleppo city... residents said, Reuters reported.”<sup>103</sup> As Stratfor explained, “Full control of Aleppo would be a huge prize for Syrian President Bashar al Assad. Russia's military intervention in support of Damascus in September has helped bolster al Assad's government.”<sup>104</sup> In response to these airstrikes, Washington and Moscow initiated talks that focused their efforts on the Islamic State, which in the frame of IPD, appears to represent forgiveness on behalf of the US and reinitiating mutual cooperation.

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<sup>101</sup> Andrew Kydd, “Yes, the U.S. and Russia can cooperate to end the Syrian civil war. Here’s why,” *The Washington Post*, 17 February 2016

<sup>102</sup> Andrew Kydd, “Yes, the U.S. and Russia can cooperate to end the Syrian civil war. Here’s why,” *The Washington Post*, 17 February 2016

<sup>103</sup> Stratfor Situation Report, “Syria: Loyalist, Russian Warplanes Continue Strikes On Aleppo,” 5 June 2016

<sup>104</sup> Stratfor Situation Report, “Syria: Loyalist, Russian Warplanes Continue Strikes On Aleppo,” 5 June, 2016

The US is not the only side to forgive, either. In a US-coalition airstrike on September 17, 2016, the warplanes hit Syrian troops instead of their Islamic State targets.

“A U.S. official said that the airstrikes Saturday were in an area believed to be where the Islamic State was operating, and the desired effect was to destroy the militants' fighting positions, weapons and equipment. The official said the pilots were given a window of 67 minutes to conduct the attacks. The Russians did not notify the United States that coalition aircraft were hitting Syrian military positions until 55 minutes into the airstrike, the official said. Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook said that the coalition's air operations center had notified the Russians that coalition aircraft would be operating in the area at the time, and the Russians had not voiced concerns. The U.S. military regularly talks with the Russians to avoid mishaps in the air, but the two countries don't cooperate on targets or military operations.”<sup>105</sup>

Instead of an explicit military retaliation, though, Moscow accused the US of perfidy. However, within a few days, there was an attack on a UN aid convoy in Syria, and the Trump administration accused Moscow of the incident.<sup>106</sup> If Russia was responsible for the attack, it definitely looks like retaliation for the US strike against Syrian troops, attempting to create a credible reputation using a tit-for-tat strategy. The goal would have been to deter the US from future defections by showing that by defecting, the US endangers UN aid workers—innocents. It is very important to note, though, that this instance of American military action follows a trend in Syria: the Americans always alert the Russians of impending military activity to prevent escalation. As will be discussed later, the Russian and American militaries in Syria actually have constant access to direct communication with one another, and they use this line frequently to avoid accidents and disasters.

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<sup>105</sup> Jim Michaels and Doug Stanglin, “Russia criticizes U.S. over airstrikes that hit Syrian forces,” *USA TODAY*, 18 September 2016

<sup>106</sup> Paul Coyer, “The Crisis Of Russian-American Relations And America's Failed Russia Policy,” *Forbes*, 15 October 2016

Furthermore in 2016, tit-for-tat strategy was executed by both Washington and Moscow. On September 28, the Dutch-led team of investigators that was looking into the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine released their findings to the world.

“The investigation, undertaken by a multinational team of seasoned investigators, announced that they had discovered ‘irrefutable evidence’ that the missile was Russian and that it had been fired from the region of eastern Ukraine controlled by pro-Russian rebels. The team also documented the journey of the missile system, which had been transported into eastern Ukraine from Russia, and then snuck back into Russia the evening after its use against the civilian airliner.”<sup>107</sup>

Although this does not directly involve Syria, the United States’s reaction did.

In response to the findings, the US State Department threatened to discontinue American-Russian cooperation against the Islamic State and warned of possible subsequent terrorist attacks against the Russians because ISIS would be more free to attack Russian targets. Then the US announced that on October 3, it would suspend talks with Moscow about cooperation in Syria because of the continuation of the Russian-backed siege of Aleppo and its staggering civilian casualties. In retaliation, that same day, the Russians claimed it was going to withdraw from the Plutonium Management & Disposition Agreement, “which was designed to reduce each sides’ stockpile of weapons-grade plutonium as well as to keep it out of the hands of terrorists.”<sup>108</sup> Then, rhetoric from the two sides became un-credible tit-for-tat assertions, escalating threats of war. But the reciprocal actions were toothless words instead of military activities, showing that both sides actually preferred cooperating to going to war.

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<sup>107</sup> Paul Coyer, “The Crisis Of Russian-American Relations And America's Failed Russia Policy,” *Forbes*, 15 October 2016

<sup>108</sup> Paul Coyer, “The Crisis Of Russian-American Relations And America's Failed Russia Policy,” *Forbes*, 15 October 2016

Therefore, it is arguable that there have been smaller games of Chicken within the larger IPD, with each side attempting to speed at the other without actually crashing, but both sides revert to the status quo of caution and cooperation against the Islamic State. “The Kremlin's bellicose posturing is less to be taken seriously as a threat of nuclear war and more aimed at deterring the United States and its European allies from intervening strongly in Syria, and possibly also to deter Washington from taking strong steps to punish Moscow for the [election] hacking for which it has been blamed.”<sup>109</sup> Each side has utilized their reputations and tit-for-tat strategy to prevent going to war.

The year of 2017 may be the most formative year for US-Russian cooperation against the Islamic State—which makes sense since cooperation and deterrence develop over time, after forming reputations and learning from strategies of other actors. In 2017, the US-led coalition claimed that 98% of IS’s territory in Iraq and Syria had been reclaimed, Iraq’s government announced that its war against the terrorist organization was over, and Putin pulled out some of the Russian troops stationed in Syria.<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, the US ended its covert program supporting the Syrian rebels.<sup>111</sup> Instead of escalating the conflict after the near-defeat of one of the major actors in the war (like Turkey did when it invaded Syria against the Kurds in 2018), the US and Russia made maneuvers to re-stabilize the state and prevent the waste of military resources. Re-stabilizing measures and the decrease in military presence and involvement from the two great powers marks the common goal of ending the Syrian war and not taking over the country or inciting a great power war. For instance, when the SDF finally recaptured Raqqa—the

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<sup>109</sup> Paul Coyer, “The Crisis Of Russian-American Relations And America's Failed Russia Policy,” *Forbes*, 15 October 2016

<sup>110</sup> *BBC*, Islamic State and the crisis in Iraq and Syria in maps, 28 March 2018

<sup>111</sup> Faysal Itani, “The End of American Support for Syrian Rebels Was Inevitable: Where the insurgency is concerned, Trump and Obama have plenty in common,” *The Atlantic*, 21 July 2017

*de facto* capital of the Islamic State’s caliphate from 2014 to 2017—the Turkey from the US coalition and Russia and Iran from the Russian coalition negotiated four de-escalation zones in the country.<sup>112</sup> The de-escalation zones are a significant marker of US-Russia cooperation, even though conflict persists in the regions. The priority of the two coalitions to promote structured peace and negotiate de-escalation zones highlights the priority of mutual cooperation.

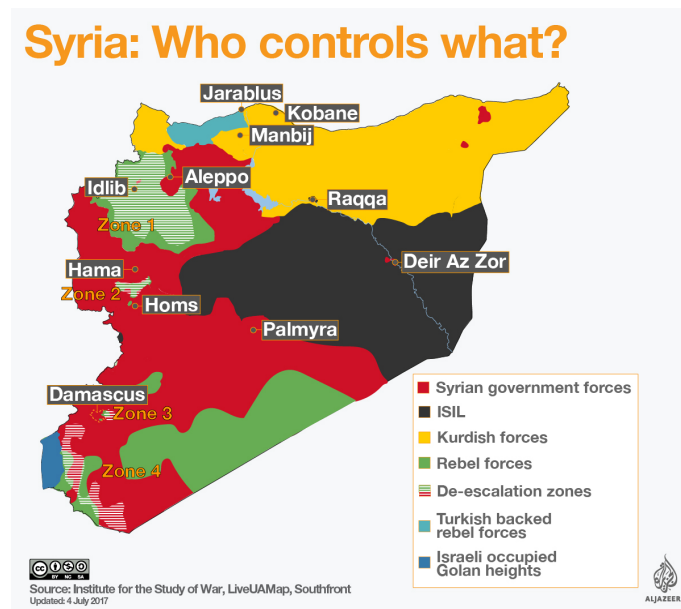
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<sup>112</sup> Figure 8; *Al Jazeera*, “Syria’s ‘de-escalation zones’ explained,” 4 July 2017

**Figure 8: Syria De-escalation Zones 2017**

“Zone 1: Idlib province, as well as northeastern areas of Latakia province, western areas of Aleppo province and northern areas of Hama province. There are more than one million civilians in this zone and its rebel factions are dominated by an al-Qaeda-linked alliance.

Zone 2: The Rastan and Talbiseh enclave in northern Homs province. There are approximately 180,000 civilians in this zone and its network of rebel groups includes al-Qaeda-linked fighters.



Zone 3: Eastern Ghouta in the northern Damascus countryside. Controlled by Jaish al-Islam, a powerful rebel faction that was participating in the Astana talks, it is home to about 690,000 civilians. This zone does not include the adjacent, government-besieged area of Qaboun.

Zone 4: The rebel-controlled south along the border with Jordan that includes parts of Deraa and Quneitra provinces. Up to 800,000 civilians live there.”

In addition to formative formal cooperation that happened this year, one of the most significant defections and instances of negative reciprocity in the civil war occurred in April 2017. President Assad's military conducted a chemical attack against the city of Khan Shaykhun, killing approximately 100 civilians and wounding many more, on April 4.<sup>113</sup> After medical analysis of victims and the compilation of intelligence, the United States, Turkey, and other international actors confidently claimed that the nerve agent sarin was used in the attack.<sup>114</sup> Although Syria and Russia have provided alternative explanations for the incident, chemical weapons experts and the American intelligence community have deemed their stories "highly implausible",<sup>115</sup> and the greater international community firmly believes Assad was behind the attack.<sup>116</sup> The April 2017 chemical attack was one of the largest in Syria since August 21, 2013, when Assad's regime used chemical weapons to attack a region outside of Damascus and killed over 1300 civilians.<sup>117</sup> This usage of chemical warfare breaks Syria's agreement in a 2013 treaty to discontinue its use of chemical weapons and disregards the prohibition of chemical weapons in international customary law.<sup>118</sup> UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon condemned the chemical attacks, saying they constitute crimes against humanity.<sup>119</sup>

In response to this breach of international law, the United States bombed Shayrat Airfield, the Syrian air base allegedly responsible for the chemical attack, to send a message of deterrence to the Syrian regime.<sup>120</sup> This was the first direct US military attack against the Syrian government's forces. If the Russians were also involved in the chemical attack, the incident

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<sup>113</sup> CNN Library, "Syrian Civil War Fast Facts," *CNN*, 14 April 2018

<sup>114</sup> *The New York Times*, "Declassified U.S. Report on Chemical Weapons Attack," 11 April 2017

<sup>115</sup> Angela Dewan, "Survivors of Syrian attack describe chemical bombs falling from sky," *CNN*, 6 April 2017

<sup>116</sup> *The New York Times*, "Declassified U.S. Report on Chemical Weapons Attack," 11 April 2017

<sup>117</sup> CNN Library, "Syrian Civil War Fast Facts," *CNN*, 14 April 2018

<sup>118</sup> Laura Smith-Spark and Samira Said, "U.N., U.S. call for urgent probe of Syria chemical attack claim," 22 August 2013

<sup>119</sup> *UN News*. "Use of chemical weapons in Syria would be 'crime against humanity'— Ban, 2013." 23 August 2013.

<sup>120</sup> *The New York Times*, "Declassified U.S. Report on Chemical Weapons Attack," 11 April 2017

marks a greater defection from their side, and the US attack represents a retaliation to the Russian-coalition defection as a mechanism to deter future attacks. The retaliation of the US against Syria was a bold defection that the Russians responded to with de-escalation measures, assuming because they feared the results of possible escalation.

Moreover, the United States military alerted the Russians of the impending attack ahead of time in order to remove Russians from the base. The American military strategically targeted areas that would ensure no collateral damage was inflicted on the Russians. In fact, the Russians had sufficient air defense capabilities around the air base to shoot at the Tomahawk missiles but chose not to do so.<sup>121</sup> Therefore, Moscow had little incentive to aggressively retaliate on behalf of the Russian military since the attack was explicitly targeting the Syrian government resources. They also had no desire to escalate this retaliatory defection by the US and had every intention of forgiving Washington and continuing mutual cooperation, but for its soft reputation, the Kremlin needed to speak out against the Americans with some threat.

In response to the retaliatory strikes against the Syrian government airfield, Russia retaliated by ‘suspending’ its Air Space Deconfliction Agreement with the US. Specifically, “Russia suspended the Memorandum of Understanding on Prevention of Flight Safety Incidents in the course of operations in Syria signed with the U.S..”<sup>122</sup> The deconfliction agreement was created in 2015 so American and Russian forces could communicate at any hour of the day using a “flight safety hotline run out of the Combined Air Operations Center at U.S. Central Command.” The hotline had previously been used by a Russian official to alert the US coalition in September 2016 “that the targets they were attacking and believed to be Islamic State forces

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<sup>121</sup> Megan Eckstein, “Russia Suspends Air Space Deconfliction Agreement With U.S. After Chemical Weapons Retaliation Strikes,” *US Naval Institute News*, 7 April 2017

<sup>122</sup> Megan Eckstein, “Russia Suspends Air Space Deconfliction Agreement With U.S. After Chemical Weapons Retaliation Strikes,” *US Naval Institute News*, 7 April 2017



were, in fact, Syrian government-aligned forces.” The US had also used the hotline to inform the Russians in March 2017 “that Russian and Syrian fighters were bombing U.S.-backed fighters rather than Islamic State forces.”<sup>123</sup> Thus, the suspension of the MOU could have had significant consequences.

However, this announcement was made for purely rhetorical purposes, attempting to show reciprocity and buffer Russia’s reputation without any substantial repercussions or tangible results. After the apparent suspension occurred, “senior US military officials said the deconfliction hotline was still open and Russians were answering their calls,” and one official assured reporters that “we have a Memorandum of Understanding with the Russian forces within that area, in Syria, and that Memorandum of Understanding agreement is still being used and being supported.” He continued, saying that “despite Russian comments and media reports... we’ve had discussions with the Russians after the attack to confirm that the Memorandum of Agreement is still active, and they confirmed that it is.”<sup>124</sup> Therefore, it is very clear that despite the Russian’s dissatisfaction with the United States and its attack against Syria, the threat of war was too great to actually stop the direct ground communication that the two militaries utilize regularly to avoid conflict. Instead, “The United States and Russian militaries continue to interact on a limited set of issues, such as the safety of operations for deployed forces. The recurring calls regarding the safety of flight over Syria are an example of this dynamic. The United States and Russia also maintain senior-level lines of communication as appropriate.”<sup>125</sup>

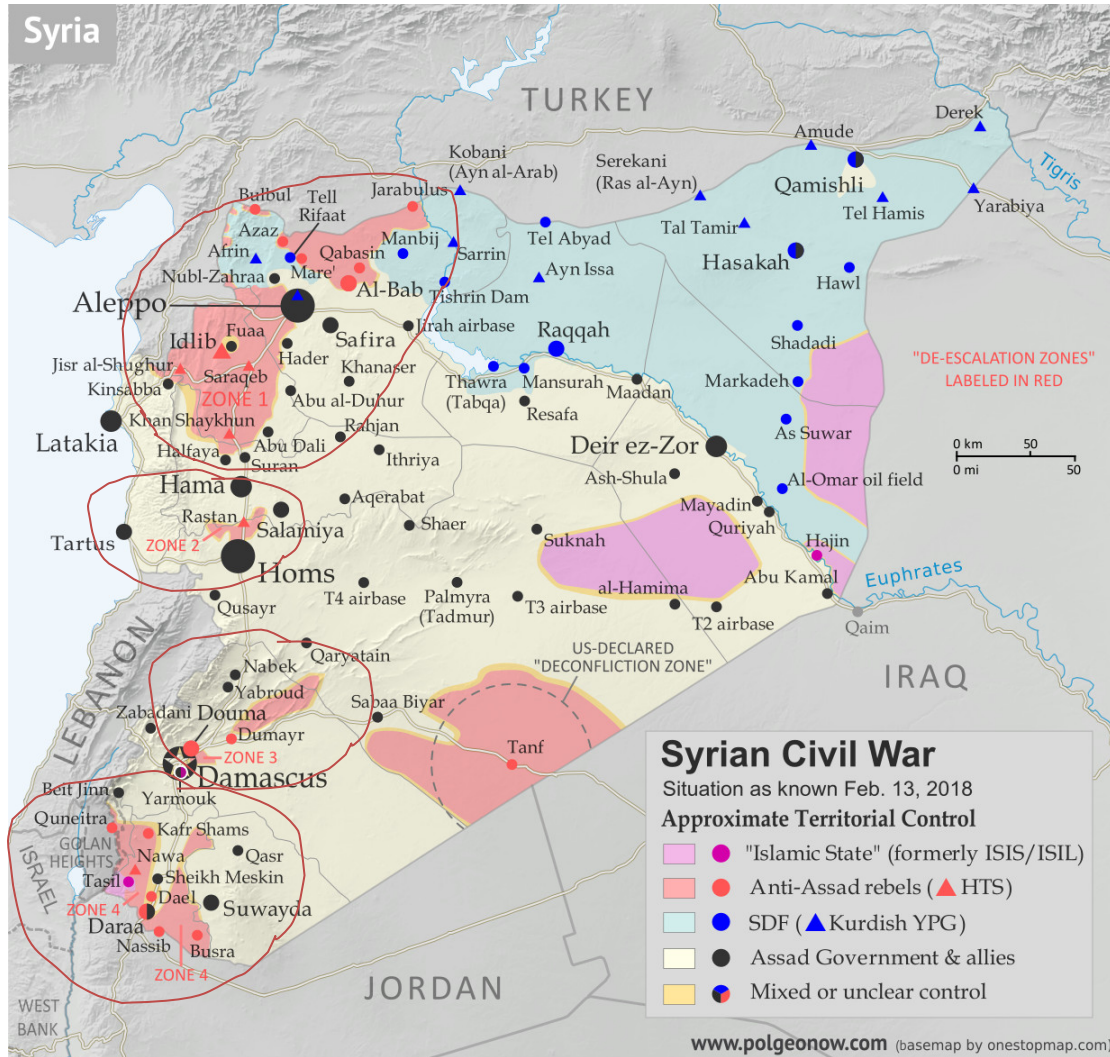
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<sup>123</sup> Megan Eckstein, “Russia Suspends Air Space Deconfliction Agreement With U.S. After Chemical Weapons Retaliation Strikes,” *US Naval Institute News*, 7 April 2017

<sup>124</sup> Megan Eckstein, “Russia Suspends Air Space Deconfliction Agreement With U.S. After Chemical Weapons Retaliation Strikes,” *US Naval Institute News*, 7 April 2017

<sup>125</sup> Adam Taylor, “What we know about the shadowy Russian mercenary firm behind an attack on U.S. troops in Syria,” *The Washington Post*, February 23, 2018

**Figure 9: De-confliction Zones in Syria**



Throughout the war, international intervention and relationships have evolved significantly. There have been two different UN special envoys for Syria—Staffan de Mistura until 2014 and then Kofi Annan—each running into problems when trying to help the Syrian people.<sup>126</sup> Washington and Moscow created specific lines of communication to protect air spaces and fighter jets above Syria and also drew a line of non-confrontation on the Euphrates.

<sup>126</sup> *Al Jazeera*, "Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning," 14 April 2018

Moreover, “in May 2017, Russia, Iran and Turkey called for the setup of four de-escalation zones in Syria, over which Syrian and Russian fighter jets were not expected to fly.”<sup>127</sup>

Therefore, despite the animosity and rhetorical escalation of relations between the US and Russia, the two have managed to cooperate to avoid a great power war, and they seem to have deterred each other from escalating tensions unnecessarily. All negative reciprocal actions between the two actors have been proportional, and both have actively attempted to avoid the other’s military. The two sides are so cautious of war that even when American troops retaliated to a surprise attack in Deir al-Zour, killing about 100 Russian mercenaries in the counterattack, the Russians and Americans both kept the confrontation quiet. Even though it was “the deadliest U.S.-Russia clash since the Cold War,”<sup>128</sup> Russia did not retaliate and the US did not escalate the situation in order to preserve status quo peace and avoid war. Deterrence has predominantly solved the US-Russia IPD, and has been so effective, that even a direct military clash has resulted in increased de-escalation measures.

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<sup>127</sup> *Al Jazeera*, “Syria’s Civil War Explained from the Beginning,” 14 April 2018

<sup>128</sup> Adam Taylor, “What we know about the shadowy Russian mercenary firm behind an attack on U.S. troops in Syria,” *The Washington Post*, 23 February 2018

#### **IV. The Future of Cooperation**

Although the future of the American-Russian relationship in Syria or the outcome of its civil war cannot be perfectly predicted, this game theory application can be utilized to make educated guesses about what might happen moving forward.

It may seem like once the Islamic State is defeated, the United States and Russia will have little incentive to cooperate. The shared goal will be achieved, the common enemy defeated, and what was once a non-zero-sum game may evolve into a zero-sum game. Once the Islamic State is gone, the two sides could have completely opposing interests in Syria—one side supporting the rebels and the other President Assad. In this case, a success in Syria for the US would mean a failure for Russia. Therefore, since there would be no opportunity or incentive for cooperation as a zero-sum game, the United States and Russia would cease to cooperate.

However, there are several issues with this prediction. First of all, it assumes the only reason the US and Russia cooperated to begin with was the common goal to defeat the Islamic State. The common enemy may have ensured the game was not zero-sum and this allowed for cooperation and mutual benefit, but it was not the only reason for mutual cooperation. The major motivation for US-Russia cooperation was not the Islamic State, but rather deterrence and the prevention of a great power war. That threat of war will remain even after the Islamic State is effectively removed from the Syrian conflict.

Moreover, the predominant consensus among the international community is that President Assad will win the war. At this point, the nearly inevitable defeat of the rebels is just being disastrously prolonged as more civilians and cities are being destroyed. Therefore, the United States has little to no incentive to go into Syria and promote the rebel factions, and Washington is likely to grievously accept Assad's retention of power. There is no point in going

to war over Syria, at least not for the US. Russia may prefer war to backing down to the US because of its strategic interests in Syria, but the United States should not consider the payoff of war with Russia in Syria better than conceding to the Russia-Syria coalition's military victory. Thus, the interests of Russia and the US are not in direct and complete opposition. The United States has humanitarian and political reasons to support an end to the war in Syria, and even if Russia wants to prolong the war in order to distract the US or make Syria more subordinate to its great power sponsor, Moscow wants the war to end with Assad still in charge and US military presence out of the country. And since the US is inclined to work with that outcome, there are similar interests that are compatible enough to prevent the game from turning zero-sum.

Now with the poisoning of a former Russian spy on UK soil on March 4, 2018 and aggressive rhetoric from both the US and the Russians about preparing for war, it is not surprising that people are paranoid about American-Russian relations in Syria. However, despite these instances of Russian and American aggression, cooperation will continue after the defeat of the Islamic State because the threat of war will persist, and the United States and international community has all but fully recognized that the war in Syria is Assad's to win. There is no point in the United States escalating the situation in Syria to a war with Russia, or vice versa. Syria is not a hinge of power or worth starting World War III over, and both sides are well aware of this fact. Additionally, the de-escalation zones remain in existence and the de-escalation hotline will likely remain active despite rhetoric from the respective leaders, as has been the case in the past. It is unlikely that something will happen to change this status quo of communication and de-escalation.

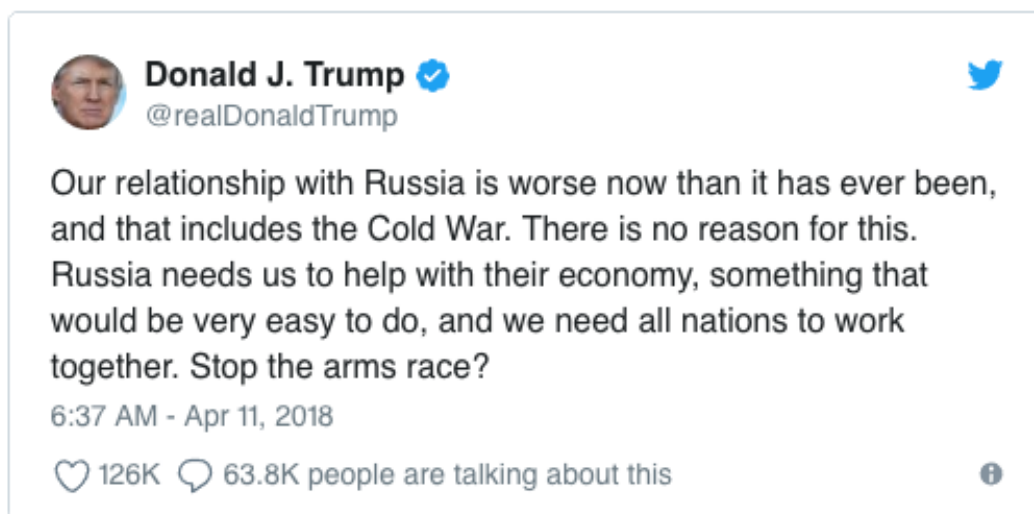
Thus, the game that the United States and Russia will play after the defeat of the Islamic State will look different than the IPD discussed throughout this paper. Nonetheless, there will

still be opportunity for cooperation between the adversarial powers, and it is likely that both sides will take advantage of this cooperation in order to avoid great power conflict.

### **But That's Not What the Media Says...**

It is true that much of the media, and even the President of the United States (POTUS), is highlighting grave tensions and prospective escalations between Washington and Moscow. News sources currently discuss 'Cold War II' and claim Washington and Moscow have the worst US-Russia relations since the Cold War, or according to President Trump, the worst relations ever.<sup>129</sup>

**Figure 9: Trump Calls American-Russian Relations in 2018 the Worst Ever<sup>130</sup>**



<sup>129</sup> Karen DeYoung, "Putin speech adds to freeze in U.S.-Russia relations," *Washington Post*, 1 March 2018; Katie Dangerfield, "Trump says U.S.-Russia relations worse now than during Cold War — he may be right," *Global News*, 11 April 2018; Ken Bredemeier, "Trump: Worst US-Russian Relations Ever," *VOA News*, 11 April 2018

<sup>130</sup> Tweet taken from: *The Daily Beast*, "Trump: Russia—U.S. Relations at Worst Level in History," 11 April 2018

The Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center Dmitri Trenin published an article in *Foreign Policy* titled, “The New Cold War Is Boiling Over in Syria: Trump’s latest airstrikes are a new U.S.-Russian missile crisis that risks devastating escalation.” In the article he states:

“The new confrontation between Russia and the United States has thus reached its first “missile crisis” moment.... There is no longer symmetry, balance, or respect between the parties. There is also no heightened fear of a nuclear Armageddon, which has the paradoxical effect of making it far easier to slide beyond the point of no return.”<sup>131</sup>

The *Washington Post* published an article by Anton Troianovski titled, “Putin ally warns of arms race as Russia considers response to U.S. nuclear stance.” In the article, Troianovski states:

“One of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s closest associates warned in an interview Wednesday that the U.S. and Russia are approaching a new arms race — the latest sign that geopolitical tensions are undermining nuclear arms control.”

And in a *CNN* article titled, “Syria strikes: The Real Impact is Moscow,” author Tim Lister states:

“US President Donald Trump appeared to surrender any hope of a working relationship with Moscow... The greatest impact of these strikes is that they will deepen the visceral hostility that characterizes relations between the US and Russia, now at their lowest ebb in decades.”<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “The New Cold War Is Boiling Over in Syria: Trump’s latest airstrikes are a new U.S.-Russian missile crisis that risks devastating escalation,” *Foreign Policy*, 14 April 2018

<sup>132</sup> Tim Lister, “Syria strikes: The real impact is in Moscow,” *CNN*, 15 April 2018

It can be alarming when the POTUS and prominent global writers and thinkers make exaggerated claims about US-Russian relations and arms races. But at the end of the day, President Trump uses significant rhetoric that does not always translate into policy, and Putin does the same. If trends continue, there will not be an arms race or another Cold War over Syria, and the US and Russia will continue to cooperate instead. One of the most important conclusions to be drawn and lessons to be learned from this project is that with the overwhelming access to information and saturation of news in society, readers must be critical of media. Specifically, audiences should critically analyze information provided to them before jumping to conclusions. All of the information in this thesis was taken from open source material—meaning anyone could recognize cooperation between the US and Russia and trends in behavior and rhetoric.

### **But What About Trump's New Policies?**

Some of Trump's policies seem to negate this prediction completely. After all, he has announced that the US will pull its troops out of Syria after the death of an American—Master Sgt. Jonathan J. Dunbar—and a British—Sgt. Matt Tonroe—serviceman in a roadside bomb attack.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, the POTUS ordered the State Department to freeze \$200 million in aid dedicated to rebuilding Syria. If this happens, ultimately the burden of re-stabilization and post-war peace will fall almost completely on Russia, and the US will back out and focus on other issues. But once again, the implementation of these policies is questionable. In fact, the immediacy of Trump's panic and desire to remove the American military from Syria strengthens the prediction. President Trump fears escalation and war to the point that when an American

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<sup>133</sup> Ashley May, "U.S. soldier killed in Syria attack identified as Master Sergeant Jonathan Dunbar," *USA Today*, 31 March 2018



soldier died, he was prepared to immediately leave—ignoring America’s foreign policy interests—instead of retaliating and risking escalation.

Trump’s aforementioned policies do not make much sense. The United States has little interest in completely backing out of Syria because then the country will be left in the hands of both Russia and Iran, most likely becoming a proxy state. A central tenet of the United States’s foreign policy is countering Iran and its influence. Backing out of the conflict in Syria completely would be ceding victory to Iran. Iran was the first state to intervene in support of the Assad regime, and it is desperately attempting to gain post-war Syria as an ally and proxy. The US and its allies in the region, especially Saudi Arabia and Israel, are opposed to the spread of Iranian influence, and with escalations between Israel and Iran, the United States will need to remain in Syria to anchor the power balance. Additionally, because the Syrian state is all but completely demolished, the re-stabilization effort is going to require great power intervention, especially in order to maintain peace. The United States will be a part of this re-stabilization effort because of its resources and foreign policy interests.

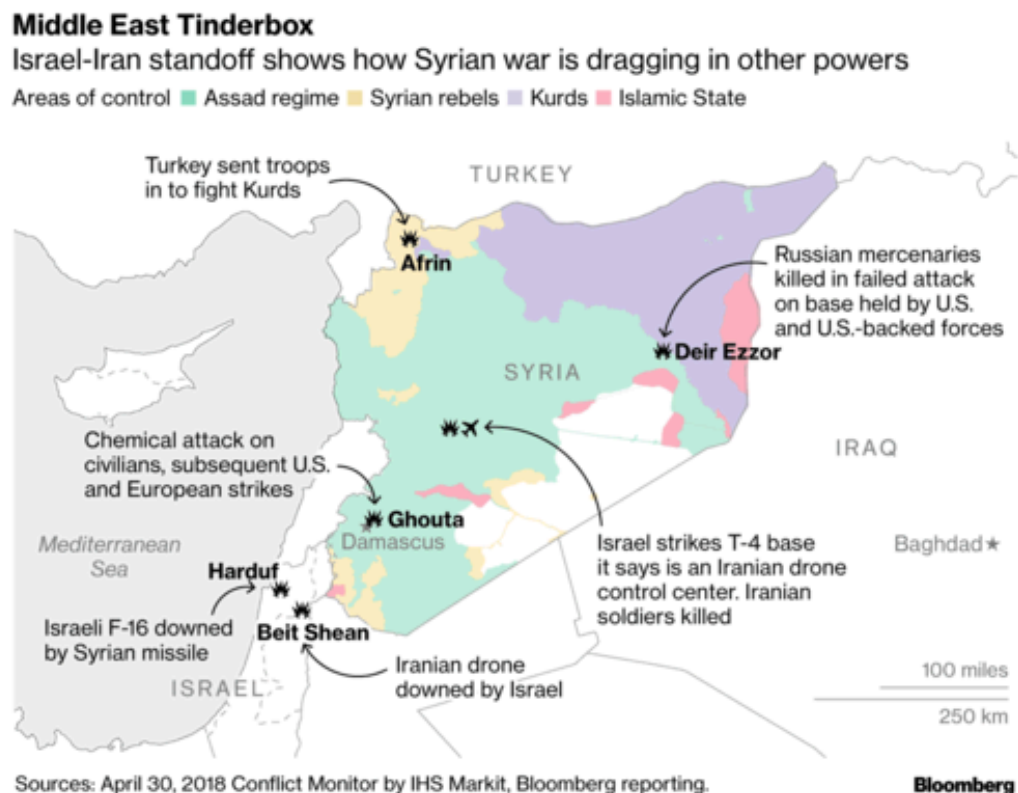
If the United States completely pulls out of Syria, the Russians and Iranians will need to become the enforcers of peace and re-stabilization. This burden lift would be good for the US because Washington would endure fewer costs and have resources to devote towards other priorities. However, if the US leaves, it would completely cede the nation to its adversaries and open up a vacuum for escalated conflict. It is unlikely these Tehran and Moscow will effectively promote peace. Iran and Russia may have insufficient resources to end conflict and rebuild the nation. There are also fissures within the Moscow-Tehran coalition, and a possible war brewing between Iran and Israel, which is hardly indicative of peace.<sup>134</sup> Because no one wants war with

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<sup>134</sup> David Wainer et. al., “Israel and Iran on Path to War as Mideast Tinderbox Awaits Spark,” *Bloomberg*, 2 May 2018

the United States--because of the deterrence achieved by US military presence in Syria—major actors limit military operations. Turkey wants the US to leave Syria so it can better pursue its military destruction of the Kurds. Russia wants the US to leave so its military can act freely. Israel wants US support against Iran, but Iran wants the US to leave because it does not want to attack the US military. Therefore, US presence and involvement serves as a great power anchor and deterrent to increased escalation. Take away this anchor, and the conflict will likely only worsen as coalitions break apart and individual actors pursue self-interests at the expense of peace.

**Figure 10: Tensions Mount Among Individual Actors in Syria<sup>135</sup>**



<sup>135</sup> David Wainer et. al., “Israel and Iran on Path to War as Mideast Tinderbox Awaits Spark,” Bloomberg, 2 May 2018

Overall, the Syrian civil war is a state-centered civil war plagued by an inherent commitment problem. Whoever wins the war—at this point, Assad—cannot commit to protecting the rebel forces once in power. He indisputably will not protect them. The major point of the operation on Eastern Ghouta was to destroy the last of the rebels' strongholds and continue to wipe out Assad's opposition. The only way the war will end is if the commitment problem is solved, which usually involves the destruction of the other side. But in this case, it could also be solved through third-party intervention and accountability mechanisms. Likely, the US will have to, and want to, remain involved in Syria.

## **Conclusion**

When stuck in a Prisoner's Dilemma, cooperation is difficult to achieve. Usually solving a PD requires outside enforcement or incentivizing mechanisms to force actors to cooperate. Cooperation in this sense is not necessarily working together, or collaborating, but rather choosing not to defect based on rational self-interest. In Syria, there is a seemingly counterintuitive phenomenon. The United States and Russia--- powers with historic tensions and animosity, as well as opposing interests in the outcome of the war in Syria—have somehow managed to cooperate against the Islamic State while also avoiding exploiting each other to the point of great power war. Solving a PD proves challenging for even the closest of allies, there is no central power in the international system to coerce or enforce, and there are no selective incentives offered to either side to promote cooperation. Therefore, something else has forced the two adversaries to cooperate with one another: the threat of great power war.

In Syria, the US and Russia are inclined to defect because they have different interests in the state and region, and they would each greatly benefit from taking advantage of the other's cooperation (exploitation). Obviously, there are trends of cooperation between the two states despite their opposing interests, so why have we seen this mutual cooperation instead of more exploitation? Every escalation between the two sides thus far has de-escalated, so obviously there is a mechanism that exhausts the desire to unilaterally defect. This mechanism is deterrence. Both the US and Russia believe that the threat of war with the other side is credible, and both agree that it would be too costly and that Syria is not worth a great power war. Thus, this threat of war is more influential than their urge to reciprocate defections, making both sides relatively forgiving and cooperative.

The case study of US-Russian relations in Syria strongly supports Axelrod's argument that it is beneficial to have a strategy that involves being nice (not the first to defect), retaliatory (defect after being defected against), and forgiving (allowing cooperation to develop after a defection or strand of defections). Both the US and Russia protect themselves and their international image when refraining from defection, and like the US air strikes against Assad, retaliating to a defection is easier to justify than being the first to defect. In Syria, there are obvious examples of political and military retaliation in order to build the two sides' reputations and remain credible actors in the conflict. Finally, because both sides are so committed to avoiding war, they are quick to forgive and re-establish cooperation. In some cases, retaliatory measures are only rhetoric and forgiveness is immediate, like with the continuous use of the de-escalation hotline despite threats from both countries to cut off communication after defections. The case study also supports Axelrod's assertion that trust and comradery are not mandatory

preconditions for cooperation, and overcoming the other side is not the marker of success. Doing well in n IPD involves eliciting cooperation.

Another interesting pattern related to deterrence is the nature of unilateral defections in Syria. Oftentimes the US only defects in retaliation to a defection from Damascus or Moscow. Most of the time these retaliatory defections are not military actions, either. The only military retaliations from the US have been the two major air strikes against the Syrian government and the self-defense of the US troops against their assailants in Deir al-Zour, which included Russian mercenaries. This highlights the prevention of escalation. Additionally, Russia stopped many of its defections on the ground in Syria after being accused of attacking US-backed rebels instead of the Islamic State. Most Russian defections have involved indirect and direct support of the Assad regime or international incidents like the downing of the civilian aircraft and the poisoning of the former Russian spy in the UK. Although the latter two incidents did not involve Syria directly, they both resulted in US reciprocity, including threats and the expulsion of Russian diplomats from the US, respectively.

However, even though mutual cooperation has been established and accepted as the status quo, cooperation is not perfect or guaranteed. Recently in 2018, Russia forbade the US from utilizing air space on the 'Russian side' of Syria to attack the Islamic State. Additionally, neither the US nor Russia can control actors on the ground. For example, Washington cannot control Ankara and its operation against the Kurds, and Moscow likely was not in control of the Russian mercenaries who attacked the US troops on the ground. Therefore, even though it makes sense to simplify the analysis into a two-player game based on coalition, the coalitions are not actually monolithic. There are intra-coalition fissures in each coalition that threaten peace and cooperation, which is actually representative of Olson's Collective Action Theory. Thus, it

appears that there is more than one ‘game’ taking place in Syria, including intra-coalition collective action problems on both sides and then the IPD between the US and Russia. The important thing for the IPD analysis is that each coalition has a great power anchor that is committed to avoiding direct war with the other.

Moreover, it seems that deterrence is different for different members of the Russian coalition. The Russians believe that the threat of war with the US is credible, and therefore, they avoid direct conflict with the American military. Russia desires parity with the US and acutely fears direct conflict. Mutual cooperation developed between the US and Russia against the Islamic State in Syria because of effective punishment strategies and this threat of great power war. However, deterring Assad is a different game altogether because Damascus knows that it has a great-power body guard in Moscow with whom the US does not want to go to war. So, the first US airstrike against Damascus in 2017 did not deter Assad from using chemical weapons again a year later. Although deterrence is usually only established after several retaliations (so air strikes cannot be completely ruled out yet as deterrents against Assad), it is clear that since Assad's motives and fears are different, so must be the mechanism of deterrence. Assad wants to regain control of the country and defeat the opposition at all costs, and as long as he is avoiding the US military, he knows the US will probably not invade or escalate conflict. The benefits of destroying Assad's opposition may outweigh the costs of a few retaliatory air strikes from the Americans.

Nonetheless, Assad is not attacking Americans, which means he is still effectively avoiding war with the US. Looking at US history, it is unlikely Washington will go to war with Syria unless Damascus directly attacks the US military. Even then, with all of the actors and conflicts involved in the ongoing war, it would be riskier for Washington to go to war than to

just remove its military presence on the ground. Therefore, deterrence is probably working on a broad scale against the Syrian government (Assad knows good and well not to attack Americans). On a smaller scale, though, it seems that Syria is so focused on the civil war that it is willing to commit atrocities even at the possible expense of military facilities and resources. The effectiveness of deterrence against the Syrian regime, at least for preventing the use of chemical weapons, is still inconclusive, but the US and Russia have managed to cooperate against IS because of the threat a war neither side wants to fight.

So why have the US and Russia cooperated in Syria? Because it is better than the alternative of iterated mutual defections resulting in war between the two powers and their coalitions. The existence of effective punishment strategies on both sides, and the credible threat that a spiral of reciprocity would lead to war, has deterred both the United States and Russia from major defections. The two sides choose the best alternative to exploitation—mutual cooperation to achieve the social optimum of defeating the Islamic State. Both Washington and Moscow know that exploitations result in retaliations because each actor has a well-established reputation of reciprocity; therefore, it is only detrimental in the long term to continuously defect in an effort to exploit. Eventually constant exploitation between the two powers would lead to iterated mutual defections and escalation. Thus, the United States and Russia managed to solve their Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma.

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